
Shoutarou Mizuki
Demon King
DAIMAO
ACT 12


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" THIS IS WHY YOU NEVER REALLY MATTERED..."
"FAREWELL..."


"W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"
"DON'T MOVE. WE'RE GOING TO DO HEM-HEM. OF COURSE I NEED TO GET NAKED."


Character Introduction
JUNKO HATTORI
A pure-hearted class rep who's in love with Akuto. Burned to death by colorless flames.
AKUTO SAI
Under Keena's control, but inevitably dragged into the war. Incredibly angry about the "power" that killed Junko.
FUJIKO ETO
A black mage and chemist who swears loyalty to Akuto. Wants to recreate true black magic.
KEENA SOGA
Empress of Japan. Holds the key to the world? Who is she, anyway?
MIWA HIROSHI
A troublemaker who calls Akuto "boss". Also the hero known as Brave.
KORONE
Formerly Akuto's observer, now Keena's personal aide. Mischievous.


YOSHIE KITA
Took a liking to Akuto after the Demon King War and decided to help him.
LILY SHIRAISHI
The student council president, in her trademark hat.
MARINE
Prince of the Republic. Releases the Faceless Power.
NONIMORA
Leader of the Marlay. Tasked with defending the Faceless Power.
KEI SAKURA
A member of CIMO8. Uses a part of Akuto's body to become a Demon King.
THE ONE
A member of CIMO8. The person (dog?) behind this incident. What is he really after?
KENTO KURAHASHI
A member of CIMO8. Tries to use to the Faceless Power, but The One gets there first.

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Prologue

Laws and ethics are different, but in the end, the distinction is only relevant for the powerless. Ensuring laws are written in accordance to ethics can only be done through the use of force. Kento Kurahashi only truly realized this just now, as he watched someone before him preparing to break the law.

The fact that he acknowledged this was a testament to the strength of his will. The average man would've simply stood frozen in shock at the sight he faced.

No blood was shed. There were no external wounds. But her life was clearly gone from her body. Her beauty was still there, but her eyes were open wide, and the pupils reflected no light. Her muscles must've lost their strength, because her jaw was open and slack. Her arms and legs were limp. She hung from the ceiling like a victim of the gallows.

But there was no rope around her neck. She was floating in the air, suspended by some invisible power. In front of the corpse was a young girl. She wore a white dress, and was looking up at the body with a dazzling smile. It had, until very recently, been her own stepsister.

"See? I just got rid of her. She was in the way, you know. She tried to have fun without me! I couldn't let her do that, could I?"

—Fun?

Kento repeated to himself the word the girl had just spoken. The woman who had died, no, had been killed, was Madoko Katayama. His girlfriend. That must have been what the little girl meant by "have fun." Was this a distaste for sexual pleasure that often developed during puberty? No, whether it was or not, it was clearly an act of jealousy.

—Jealousy? Did I just say jealousy?

But Kento knew that was impossible. The girl was actually a boy, and Kento was one of the very few who knew this.

Kei Sakura. That was his name. After he'd lost his parents, Madoko had taken him in, and raised him like a younger brother.

Of course, she hadn't done it out of the goodness of her heart. Kei was possessed of incredible talent. Magical talent.

Mana responds to the shape of the mind. But this only means that the nanomachines that make up mana respond mechanically to your brainwaves. It's up to the individual's imagination to determine what sort of effect those brainwaves have.

Special combinations of words, or certain mental images, could serve as triggers. But it wasn't known how, exactly, it worked. For this reason, the powers of a mage are a product of his or her individual psyche.

Madoko and Kento were some of the world's best magical researchers, but they'd run up against that barrier, and found themselves unable to advance. They'd exhausted their ideas for exploring their own potential, and now they were forced to find a new subject.

Kei had lost his parents at a young age, and been sent to an orphanage. After they'd seen him using magic before he'd even learned to speak, the orphanage sent word to the church, who sent word to Kento. After their investigations revealed that Kei hadn't learned magic from anyone, they used their tools to observe him using his mana smashing a toy into a friends' head.

Whether the devil had whispered into Madoko's ear, or Kento's, there was no way to know. They'd pulled some strings, and Kei became Madoko's legal son, to be raised like a little brother. It didn't even take a week.

Kei's unnatural talent quickly became obvious. He came up with several of his own original spells, similar to existing magic but with his own personal touch. He was forced to, since the couple kept him isolated from anyone who could teach him.

They wanted his ideas to be entirely his own. But he was equally abnormal in all other ways. He was a free spirit, and Madoko and Kento were forced to indulge him. It was precisely that individuality they were counting on.

Still, he took it too far. He took it to a level that bordered on insanity. For example, after developing a powerful healing spell, he would continually hurt, and then heal Madoko, as some kind of "game."

It was a necessary sacrifice in order to develop a unique style of magic, but it was still a heavy price to pay. After that, they tried to teach him to "Not do to others things that you wouldn't like them

to do to you," but it was already too late.

Kei just ended up chopping off his own arm and sticking it back on, not even flinching at the process. His magic even allowed him to modify his physical body. He had, in a sense, performed plastic surgery on himself.

As he grew, he became more beautiful, and by the time he reached puberty his body was remarkably androgynous. He possessed a beauty that transcended gender.

Even Kento, who was used to his presence, would often find himself stopping to stare when he let his guard down, and Madoko was no different.

That was the point when Kento should've noticed. Kei had become beautiful, so that he could use that to his advantage.

Kei was gradually claiming his freedom.

Of course, the plan had been from the start to gradually educate him in the manner that Kento desired, before returning him to a normal life. But he was advancing much faster than Kento had anticipated. If anything, Kei seemed to be setting the pace himself.

But still, in front of Kento, Kei was obedient. That was why it took several years to discover what was going on. Kento didn't even realize what had been happening until Madoko was dead, and he heard it from Kei's own lips.

"You and sister never noticed this, but the fact that I was doing it meant that I wanted you to notice. Why didn't you notice that I wanted you to notice?"

Kei leveled a seemingly contradictory accusation.

"Notice... what?" Kento asked, and Kei laughed.

"Of course, the fact that I was taking all of your research staff."

"You were... You were what?"

"In a sexual way, that is. I'm a little better at magic than anybody thought. That means I can read minds, and control them, too."

Kento was stunned. He'd known that the staff had been charmed by Kei's looks, but he hadn't known things had progressed that far. Part of the fault lay in the fact that Kento wasn't especially experienced in sexual matters, but more than anything, most of the research staff were men.

"That's impossible..."

"Impossible? You know that common sense is of no interest to me. That's what makes me who I am."

“Then…”

“Beauty is beauty whether you’re a man or a woman, right? And anyway, in a natural state, a beautiful boy would be loved by both men and women. You’ve been making me study history lately, and one of the things I’ve learned is that the idea of sex only being between a man and a woman is a relatively recent development.”

He laughed seductively.

“And even if I am good at magic, they still could’ve countered it, right? The only thing I used my mana for was to make myself more beautiful. Mind reading and mind control are old magics… In other words, I didn’t use mana to seduce them, but words and gestures. The magic of love, if you’ll pardon the anachronism.”

As Kento stood there silently, Kei walked forward and wrapped an arm around his neck.

“You’re the only one it didn’t work on. And when it didn’t work, it just made me want to try harder, you know?”

Kento was shaking. For the first time in his life he was truly afraid.

—I’ve created a monster!

But that wasn’t what scared him. What scared him was the fact that he found the monster fascinating.

—Maybe I… no, maybe ONLY I, can control this monster.

“I can’t believe I couldn’t recognize how you felt…”

Kento took his hand. If there was such a thing as a deal with the devil, this was it.

1 - The Prelude to Destruction is Always Silent

It was clear from the expression on Morlock's face that his confidence had instantly abandoned him.

He was shaking. There was a cold sweat on his skin. These reactions were natural, but not to the degree he displayed here.

The sweat wouldn't stop dripping down his face, and his shaking was sending it scattering everywhere.

Morlock was a veteran spy and saboteur, and he was only this scared because it was Akuto that he was facing. Akuto's expression was that of a demon. It was a handsome one, and thus when it became twisted, it became more terrible than anyone else's.

The look in his eyes was purely murderous. He was ready to kill.

"I was trying my best to come up with a reason to kill you... and I just found one."

When he said this, all the mana in the surrounding air disappeared. There hadn't been much to begin with, but the very atmosphere within the empire's borders was suffused with mana. If it all disappeared, it could only mean that Akuto had instantly collected it within his body.

"Impossible!" Morlock shouted.

No one had ever been able to do such a thing, no matter how powerful they were. Even if you had the energy to do it, you still needed a mind capable of manipulating the mana down to the individual particle.

Akuto waved a finger. That alone was enough to freeze his body in the air, arms stretched out like he was nailed to a cross, and bring him in front of Akuto like he was being pulled by a magnet.

"Please don't kill him!"

"Don't kill me!"

Two voices overlapped. One was Morlock's. One was Keena's.

"Don't kill him, huh? That's smart. It's better for me if I don't

kill him."

Keena's expression turned to relief. But Morlock had been through enough dire situations and deadly battles to know there were fates worse than death. The sadism hadn't vanished from Akuto's face.

"P-Please! Please, no!" he begged, but Akuto silenced him with a wave of a hand.

"If you're going to beg for forgiveness, you shouldn't go around attacking people in the first place."

As he screamed, Morlock's body began to shrink. He'd always had the power to grow or shrink at will, but this time it clearly wasn't intentional.

"P-Please, no!"

Morlock's shrinking ability didn't actually give him the power to change his size. Instead, he sent most of his body into virtual phase space, and then built a new body with mana. Akuto had used this fact to his advantage.

"Ugyaaah!"

Morlock screamed and screamed, and his screams gradually began to get quieter. Akuto had sealed him inside the VPS, and reduced his body's size to that of a few mana particles. Morlock was now the size of a few grains of sand, too small to even scream.

"Aaaah!"

Inside VPS, he was screaming and crying. But his voice went underheard in the real world. All he could see was a colorless, microscopic world. Even the particles of dust in the wind seemed the size of asteroids, and the salty breeze blowing over the ocean struck his body like a hurricane. He would be trapped in that tiny, lonely world for eternity, until the day that the mana ran out. As he watched, helpless and afraid, a wind blew up off the ocean, and carried it away with him inside its current, and he disappeared from sight.

"Ackie... What... what did you do?" Keena asked, fearfully.

"I trapped him inside virtual phase space. And I shrunk his body down to microscopic size."

His tone was cold, but she could feel the fire behind it. The flames of his anger remained stoked.

"Ackie..."

Keena's voice held a mix of fear and sadness.

"Y-You can't do that... Because..."

“I didn’t kill him. I did just what you told me to,” Akuto said coldly.

“No... You know that wasn’t what I meant! The Ackie I know wouldn’t be so mean to me!”

Keena began to cry. There was a flash of emotion in Akuto’s eyes.

“But he’s working with the people who killed Junko...!” he said, angrily.

Keena fell silent. The silence continued for a moment, until suddenly it was broken by Korone.

“If you want revenge, that’s fine... But are you aware of what’s going on here?”

Korone was a Liradan, and so she was perfectly calm. Akuto seemed far from calm, however. There was a chance he didn’t even know what was going on.

“Of course I understand what’s going on. The guy behind all this is right over there!”

He pointed with a finger toward the airship that The One was aboard. Akuto was aware that a member of CIMO8, as well as the leader of the Republic, were aboard it. He knew that Marine, the Republic leader, had used the Faceless Power as well. But the conclusion he’d drawn from this beggared belief.

He would attack the airship and defeat them both. That was his only conclusion.

Only anger drove him now.

“Wooooooah!” Akuto howled.

He leaped off the ground. As he jumped, a tornado formed around him.

Keena covered her face.

“No!” she screamed, but Akuto was already high in the sky. A shockwave formed around him as he flew straight toward the airship.

“Empress, please seal the Demon King’s power away.” Korone said sharply.

She gasped and nodded. Until now, she’d forgotten, but the Empress — that is, her — had the power to seal away Akuto’s power. She’d been using her power to “unleash” his full strength, when he needed it, but now she could use it to shut him down.

“As Empress, I seal...” she shouted. But her voice trailed off.

Confused, she looked down at her hand.

"...What's wrong?" Korone asked.

"H-Huh...? I can't do it." Keena shook her head, trying to recover the sensation that was now lost to her.

"You can't do it?" Korone asked, confused.

"N-No...! I need this power...! Come on! Come on!" Keena waved her hands again and again. But it didn't help.

"She can't use the Imperial power...?"

Korone considered the source of the Empress's power.

—*The Faceless Power.*

It was the power of will, completely separate from mana. Probably, she thought, it was some kind of collective consciousness. If she couldn't use it, it meant that Keena had lost her ability to access the Faceless Power. There was no way to tell if this was due to an external cause, or an internal one...

"Why...?! I want to stop Ackie! Just this once, I have to stop him!"

Keena's cries went unheard, and Akuto was now practically on top of the airship.

Bullets and energy beams were pouring out from its gunports, but Akuto was ignoring them. A small plume of smoke rose up from the airship's disc-shaped side. Akuto's body had easily pierced its armor.

○

Marine was shocked at the results of his actions. He had made it possible to use the Faceless Power, yes. But he'd had no idea that this would be the result.

He'd intended to use it to stop the nuclear attack, but instead, he'd wiped a part of the Empire's coast off the face of the Earth.

"The Faceless Power reacts strongly to collective will. The people of the Republic must have wanted that very badly," The One said.

The One resembled a talking dog, but according to him, he was an alien being of pure mind merely possessing the body of a dog. And a servant of the devil too, at least by Marine's estimation.

He'd baited Marine into using the Faceless Power, knowing full well what would happen.

"You tricked me!" Marine screamed.

But The One just smiled back.

“Hahaha! Give power to a life form, and it always ends up the same way. That’s all there is to it.”

“And if that’s not trickery, what is?” In this moment, Marine gave up on negotiating with The One. He accelerated his body to smash his fist into the dog’s face. But...

—Why?!

Marine’s body froze. He couldn’t move forward. He couldn’t even raise a fist. It was like his body was moving through a sea of heavy mud.

“Ha, hah!” The One laughed.

“I’m using something like hypnosis! I subjected you to it when I saved you. You can’t attack me. When I’m up against someone strong like you, it’s important to take precautions.”

“It can’t be... an implant?!”

There was no way to control another person’s mind with normal magic. With one exception. You could implant a device inside their body, where their mana was strongest.

“Very perceptive. That’s right. I can’t just take over completely, after all. I need you to use the Faceless Power...”

“Tch... You’re going to make me use it again? We’re already at the point where a world war is unavoidable...”

“Yes, we’ve succeeded in causing a world war. But I’m interested in what happens after that,” The One said.

“There’s... more?” Marine’s face twisted in even greater terror. He’d never even considered that they were planning something greater than a world war.

“That’s right. I’m going to destroy the world in a way you’d never expect. And for that to happen, I need the Faceless Power. And I’ll need more help from your subjects.”

Just then, an alarm sounded as a hole was blasted in the side of the airship. The One and Marine both looked up, confused at what had just happened. Akuto slowly walked out of the smoke, after blasting through the wall with overwhelming force. Neither Marine nor The One could say a single word.

There was no way they could’ve predicted that a man would fly toward their ship at a speed too fast to detect, blast straight through several walls, and then slowly walk toward them.

Akuto opened his mouth.

“I’m not interested in what you have to say.”

His voice was low, like a growl. It chilled Marine to his very

bones. But at the same time, he couldn't bring himself to look away. Along with the fear, he felt an incredible attraction. The same thing was true for The One.

"Have you come bearing death, cursed one?" The One asked. There was fear in his voice, but also a note of praise. But The One's actions were those of a creature acting out of fear.

He grabbed the Jeweled Branch in his mouth, and jumped on top of a pilot's seat that was shaped like a dog's bed.

"I may be old, but I'm not senile enough to try and face you head on!" The One said, as shutters came down and sealed off the whole cockpit.

On the other side of the shutters, you could hear the sound of air pressure changing. The cockpit had probably been ejected from the airship.

Normally Akuto would've broken through the shutters and chased after him, but at this point he was far from sane. There was telling what he'd do.

"You killed Junko!" He charged thoughtlessly at Marine and attacked.

Marine raised a hand to try and block, but a torrent of power swept over him that made that impossible. Without even thinking, Marine used the Faceless Power. A light made of compressed mana, and a different, dazzling light, exploded between them.

"Gaah!"

"Guh!"

The two of them both moaned in pain and fell back from one another. There still seemed to be a burning heat in the air between them.

"That power...! Is that power what killed Junko?!" Akuto screamed.

"This... power..." Marine stared down at his hands.

He'd just used a power that wasn't mana in combat. He could feel it. This was the same power that the Republic's people had used to destroy the coast. The Faceless Power. A mysterious power that unleashed massive destruction in response to a strong human will. A forbidden power that The One had encouraged him to use freely.

Marine could feel that the power had reacted to his own will. His fear of Akuto and his self-defense instincts had caused it to activate.

"Did that evil within you kill her?" Akuto howled.

His power began to grow again. It was coming off him in waves of tangible pressure.

The mana was spreading out around him in a ball. And at the ball's center, Akuto made it explode.

"Gwoah!"

Marine used the Faceless Power again. If he hadn't, the shock wave would've ripped him apart. It was too much for the airship, which was torn apart from the inside.

How much power it would take to do that...

Marine didn't want to think about it.

A warship like this would have armor only slightly less thick than a tank. And Akuto had blown it apart like a bursting balloon. Of course, Marine was just as capable of the impossible. The Faceless Power easily shielded him from it.

Fragments of the airship began to fall to the ground around him. The two of them were at the center of the explosion, but both were unharmed. Marine's feelings about the Faceless Power were complex. It seemed equal in strength to Akuto's mana. He had the power to fight Akuto, if he wanted.

Without it, he was dead, but it was hard to imagine such power as this not coming with a price. And then there was what The One had said to consider, as well.

"Stop this at once! You and I shouldn't fight!" Marine shouted.

Akuto was unimpressed.

"Uwoooah!"

He rushed toward Marine once more.

Marine hadn't lost control, and despite its incredible power, it would've been fairly easy for him to dodge Akuto's charge. But instead, he blocked.

"Nuh...!"

He collided with Akuto head on. There was the sound of an explosion as their two powers collided. They both grimaced. But Akuto kept up his attack without slowing down.

"Uwoooooaaah!"

Punches rained down on Marine. But Marine still just tried to block. And instead of using the Faceless Power, he blocked it with his own mana.

"Gaaah...!

He was blocking with his own mana-enhanced arms, but Akuto was using every ounce of his power. In the blink of an eye, his arms

had sustained incredible damage.

"So this is your rage... your hatred...."

Marine had the vague idea that this was his punishment. Perhaps the Faceless Power was too much for humans to play with... For a single moment, Akuto's fists stopped.

"What are you doing...?" Akuto asked.

"Well... The only time a man can lose his cool is when his parents or lover are killed. And that's probably what's happening to you right now. But... I see in you a man who bears the fate of an entire country. And thus, as someone who wishes to speak to you as an equal, it is my duty to endure your fury until you regain your senses."

Akuto sighed quietly when he heard this. But of course, it wasn't nearly enough to quell his anger. He raised his fist and screamed.

"Then don't block! I'll end this with a single strike!"

The Demon King's words were madness. But they were convincing. Marine lowered his guard, without even thinking about it.

"...!"

He was ready to die. If this was Akuto's final strike, that was okay with him. It was his punishment for allowing himself to be deceived. But...

The shock he was expecting never came.

"Don't do it!"

A high-pitched voice slid in between them. Akuto's fist stopped. Marine's body froze. It was something that no one could have ever expected, and so it easily caught the both of them off guard. Nonimora had slid in between the two of them. And...

She was kissing Akuto.

"What...?"

The feeling of her soft lips drained the power from Akuto's body. The rage faded from his eyes. Marine was too shocked to move, as well. And then...

Nonimora flipped around in mid-air and kissed Marine on the lips, too.

It all happened incredibly fast.

"Calm down, boys."

She moved her lips away from his, and then pointed an index finger at both of them to stop them.

“If you want to stop a fight, Muchumuchu is the best way.”

Akuto and Marine were both too surprised to move. Marine recovered first, probably because he had more experience with women.

“Please understand. I want to talk,” Marine said.

Akuto had lost his chance to start the fight again. He stared back at Marine wordlessly.

“You should calm down. When the Faceless Power is used by an evil heart, it becomes an evil power. The important question is who has the evil heart.”

Marine’s expression changed as Nonimora spoke.

“You heard her. I understand your rage. But it’s my people that you’re mad at. If I have to apologize for something, it’s that.”

Marine’s face seemed filled with despair.

“Rage... toward his people?”

Akuto was beginning to calm down, and as he did, his naturally sharp instincts were beginning to return. He was beginning to realize what those words meant.

“Are you telling me that people’s hatred was what scorched the land?” Akuto asked.

Marine nodded quietly.

“Most likely...”

Akuto understood what the look on Marine’s face meant.

“T....” Akuto gritted his teeth, unsure of where to direct his anger.

“The Faceless Power acts based on the mind. The prince is responsible for unleashing it, of course,” Nonimora said.

Marine nodded.

“I believed in my people. If you want to say that that was foolish, go ahead. I know what I’ve done can never be undone. But... I also saved the Empire from nuclear weapons. I want you... to understand that. Understand that it was a good power as well.”

Akuto shook his head.

“I’m not sure what the hell I’m supposed to say to that. So what am I supposed to do, then?”

“We’ll just have to believe... that a good power can be better than an evil one.”

Marine didn’t seem, however, to believe it himself.

○

“Ackie...”

Keena saw everything that happened in the sky from below. Of course, she’d seen Nonimora kiss him as well. She knew that she didn’t have a choice, but it still hurt. She wanted it to be her own kiss that calmed Akuto down. The fact that someone else had stolen that role from her... hurt more than she’d expected.

“Shall I strangle that primitive in her sleep, your majesty?” Korone asked.

Keena knew she was trying to lighten the mood, but it didn’t work.

“You can’t strangle her. You know that...”

“I see. That’s a shame.”

“It’s not a shame at all...” Keena sighed.

The three above them were coming down from the sky. The air was filled with gloom. Both Akuto and Marine had pursed their lips into a frown, and even Nonimora looked stern.

“Ackie...” Keena said as he landed, but all he did was give her a short nod.

“Are we following The One?” Korone asked.

That, Akuto responded to.

“Looks like we don’t have a choice. He stole the Jeweled Branch, and without it, we can’t steal the Faceless Power.”

Akuto glanced in Marine’s direction quickly. Marine didn’t nod, but he agreed with Akuto.

“I think we should. The Faceless Power needs to be sealed as soon as possible.”

“Despite the power it offers...?” Akuto looked at Marine with doubtful eyes. With the Faceless Power, Marine was every bit as strong as Akuto. But Marine agreed with him once more.

“It should be sealed. I’m counting on my people to use it as a good power... but The One said this: He was going to destroy the world in a way no one would ever expect, and for that, he had to continue to use the Faceless Power.”

Marine’s expression was serious. Akuto’s expression didn’t change, but he agreed, at least verbally.

“Then we follow The One. We get back the Jeweled Branch and seal the Faceless Power.”

“I’ll help with that... But there’s a problem. I’ve been given an implant which prevents me from attacking The One.” Marine said, apologetically.

“An implant?” Akuto said. He didn’t know how they worked.

Korone spoke up.

“A type of brainwashing that implants small machines into the body to directly control a person’s mana. It’s very difficult to deal with.”

She took an X-Ray device out of her bag and held it up to Marine.

“Let me take a look.”

The device, which looked like a speed detector, was displaying Marine’s abdomen on its monitor. Inside they could see the silhouette of what looked like a small capsule.

“With my surgical tools I can remove the implant itself. But that may be dangerous to your mind,” Korone explained.

Many implants contained traps to make them difficult to remove. The ones that just exploded were bad enough, but the most dangerous of them all were those that had a magical effect on the victim’s mind.

Nonimora suddenly spoke up.

“If it’s an implant, I can deal with it.”

“What do you mean?” Korone asked, but Nonimora nodded confidently.

“Implants have been a part of the village’s tradition for years. Of course, the ways to remove them have, too.”

“That’s right. Your village has lost technology, doesn’t it?”

“Do you not use them anymore? The best way to remove the trap is to do hem-hem during the operation. It makes it so it can’t affect your mind.”

Nonimora puffed out her chest.

“Truly one of life’s great mysteries,” Korone said, but she seemed sufficiently convinced.

“Okay, I’ll do it! Come with me, Mr. Handsome man!” Nonimora beckoned to Marine.

You wouldn’t guess it from the way she was acting, but hem-hem was this village’s euphemism for sex.

“Are you serious?” Akuto asked. But Nonimora’s face was serious indeed.

“Asking if I’m serious is rude. I’m very serious. Of course, since it’s not a festival I don’t want to let people see it, so we’ll go into those bushes.”

“Um... wait...”

Both Akuto and Marine were hesitant. But Korone and Nonimora each grabbed Marine by an arm and dragged him off into the bushes.

"If it'll get rid of the implant, I'll do it..." Marine said, still a bit hesitant.

And then they went into the bushes and out of sight. Akuto and Keena were left behind, unsure of what to do next. The circumstances were incredibly serious, but still, something felt ridiculous about this whole situation. The two of them both sighed and sat down.

They could hear voices from the bushes, but couldn't see.

"When do I remove the implant?"

"When the mind starts to focus on the hem-hem. That's when you do the surgery."

Marine didn't seem to know what hem-hem meant.

"Hem-hem...?"

"You don't know it? Well, that's fine. Just don't move."

A minute later they heard Marine cry out in surprise.

"W-What are you doing?!"

"Don't move. We're going to do hem-hem. Of course I need to get naked."

"Naked...? Why?"

"Because we're doing hem-hem. Just like I said."

"Wait... why are you taking my pants off, though?"

"Can you be a little more cooperative? Hem-hem is a two person job, you know."

Nonimora's voice was bright and cheerful, but Marine gasped in shock.

"D-Don't tell me that hem-hem is..."

"Hem-hem is hem-hem, duh. Now stay put. We're going to get rid of that implant."

"But what does that have to do with anything...?"

"Hem-hem helps the mind concentrate. Weren't you listening?"

It was hard to tell if Marine found this explanation persuasive or not, but he shot up.

"But I'm a prince, you know..."

"Who cares? It's not like guys lose anything by doing it. Nobody else will know if you did or not."

"But your body..."

"I'm very healthy. I don't have any diseases. Do you?"

“No, I don’t... but...”

“Then we’re fine. Today’s a day where I won’t become pon-pon, after all. Now... huh? You’re not very baki-baki, are you?”

“I-I don’t know how I could be, considering...”

“Let go! That’s a very rude thing to do to a woman. I’ll make sure everything’s ready. Be grateful!”

“Hyah... uwah...”

There was the sound of something rubbing something else, and then muffled whispers.

“How do we handle the timing?”

“We’ll have to have him tell us. Take out the implant when he reaches his peak.”

“His peak?”

“When he dop-dops, of course.”

Akuto could do nothing but chuckle as he sat there listening. The whole atmosphere had changed.

“Y-You know, this is kind of...” Akuto whispered.

Maybe this was something Nonimora had that made her special. She’d just saved him a few moments earlier, too. If she hadn’t intervened, he would’ve killed Marine.

“Hey, Ackie...”

He heard a voice next to him. Keena was leaning up against him.

“What is it?”

“Um...”

Keena was fidgeting. They could hear lustful moans and the sounds of two things rubbing together from the bushes. Sitting in silence, there was no way for them to avoid it.

“Um, well... uh...”

Akuto tried to speak and trailed off too. Suddenly, Keena made her move. She wrapped an arm around Akuto’s body, and looked up into his eyes.

“Ackie...” she said, and pursed her lips.

Akuto knew what she meant. He remembered the conversations she’d had with Nonimora. He’d known for a while now what she wanted him to do. But...

Normally the feeling of Keena’s body against his made him relax. But now it just felt heavy. Part of the reason was that he’d betrayed her by killing Morlock. And part of it was that he’d just lost Junko, the other girl he loved.

Keena closed her eyes.

The moans from the bushes were becoming impossible to ignore. For some reason, Akuto felt like he was being forced into something he didn't want to do.

"That's not right."

He didn't know what wasn't right, but he said it anyway. Keena's face looked sad as she opened her eyes.

"I'm sorry. But um..."

Akuto shook his head. And then suddenly, he heard the sound of something popping within her. It was like a soap bubble being blown by a gentle breeze.

Akuto looked into her eyes, surprised. They were a mysterious color.

"Something sad, very sad, is going to happen. Your mistake began a long time ago, after all."

He recognized the soft voice. The Law of Identity. That's what she had called herself, he recalled.

"Keena?"

"The girl you call that is me, but not me. Especially now," she answered.

"Why did you show up now?" he asked.

"Because her heart can no longer endure the pain..." The other Keena answered sadly. "That's the answer that's closest to the truth."

"But I..." Akuto began to mumble. But the Law of Identity continued.

"This is your mistake. For a long time, and even now, you've continued to make a very small mistake. You let me do your thinking for you. You fought against other's plots. But still, you never truly resisted. And this is the result. My prayer is that you will not make that mistake again."

She was neither blaming nor consoling him, simply speaking the truth.

Akuto didn't understand what she was saying. No, he didn't want to understand. It had come out of nowhere, but she was talking about his sin. The being he called the Law of Identity had saved him several times before. When Boichiro Yamato had tried to do the ritual with her. When he'd been left on the moon with her. But now, she'd come out of nowhere to condemn him.

"Mistake? I don't think what you're saying is right. And I think

of you as a savior…”

“That is your mistake. The false story that you’ve rejected for so long… If it is false, then the story where I am a savior is false too. Yes. I am who I am, and nothing more. Anything which is enough of a story that it cannot reject causality, is a mistake,” she said calmly.

“What…?”

In a vague way… he knew what she meant. But if that was true… if that was really true…

“Tell me… What should I do?”

“Nobody knows the answer to that. But only the passage of time will tell you of your mistakes. That’s all there is to it. With great power comes great responsibility. That is the way of mankind. The truth is that a great power can be used in any way its wielder wishes. But the results of how that power is used will always exist.”

“That’s crazy. That’s causality itself. Are you saying that you’re god, or something?”

“No. I am the beginning of the self. The first point of its existence. Since I have existed from the start of time, I have seen many mistakes made. Even I don’t know what is right. What those with power desire, is what becomes everything that is right.”

The answer given was one of despair.

“So you’re saying it’s my fault that I’ve lost so much?”

“Correct. But still, you must continue forward, as you always have.”

“But I can’t…!” Akuto trailed off.

And then he realized that there was nothing else she had to say to him. The strange color faded from Keena’s eyes. The normal Keena was back. By the time an awkward-looking Marine and oddly-satisfied looking Nonimora came back, Keena was looking at Akuto with a sad look on her face.

2 - About a Life That Will Soon Die

The state of the battle was as bad as it could be. Yoshie Kita and Yuko Hattori, who were sitting in the command room watching it unfold, were some of the few people in the empire who understood its true scale.

“The Northern Sea Theater has been wiped out!”

“Every city in Kyushu has gone up in flames!”

“There’s no answer coming in from Shikoku!”

“Central theater is requesting reinforcements!”

More and more terrible messages were coming in. They knew why. The explosion, no, the flames, that had killed Junko were now landing all over the Empire. It was the Faceless Power.

“If Brave’s report is right, the Faceless Power is the collective consciousness of an entire race,” Yoshie whispered.

“Why is it destroying a whole country? Nobody can be permitted to have a power like that!”

The tears were flowing endlessly down Yuko’s face. But Yoshie shook her head.

“If there ever was a power that could be commanded by human will, it would be dedicated to destruction, not creation. Of course, in the long run, it will turn toward creation, but during a time of war...”

“Then what can we do to stop it?”

Yuko’s voice was practically a scream.

Yoshie tapped the keys of the computer in front of her, analyzing the situation.

“The power isn’t something supernatural. Those colorless flames are heat, manifesting from another dimension. In other words, if there was some power that could control it, like virtual phase space...”

“The Imperial Capital Coast has avoided destruction. It’s the Demon King. The Demon King is pushing back the enemy!” one of the incoming messages said.

“That’s right... The Demon King has that power!”

“But this demon king isn’t Akuto, it’s...”

“It’s Kei Sakura...!”

The two of them looked at each other.

○

It was, in fact, Kei Sakura. Kei was alone, pushing back the forces of the Republic. He was at the front lines of the capital city’s defense. Kei was floating in the air, surrounded by a dazzling light, sinking one Republic ship after another as they swarmed in from the sea.

He looked less like a demon king, and more like an angel passing judgment.

“I never thought I had it in me to protect the whole capital,” Kei said.

He’d put up a screen to block the colorless flames coming down from the sky, as he used the rest of his power to sink the ships. It wasn’t easy, but it was possible for him now.

“I’m feeling sharper than I ever have in my life.”

But an opponent that would be difficult even for him was coming over the ocean.

“...Sigh. I didn’t expect him to come here,” Kei said.

It was Brave. He was flying low above the ocean, like a missile.

○

“Anti-Demon King Combat Mode.”

“Command received. Entering Anti-Demon King Combat Mode.”

Brave activated the mana canceler, and his mana-absorbing device began to run as well.

“In this situation, I’m at an overwhelming advantage,” Brave said to Kei. He wasn’t using the comms system. They were close enough that they could speak to one another.

“I know. But why are you attacking me?” Kei smiled.

“Because you’re a demon king!” Brave shouted as he flew toward Kei. Kei just barely managed to dodge the charge at the last second.

“I’m protecting the Empire though now, aren’t I?” Kei’s voice was calm, but his movements were hurried. He was putting up the screen, attacking the enemy ships, and fleeing Brave. Even for Kei, dodging Brave’s attacks was the most he could do.

“But you’re killing the Republic’s people!”

He brought his high-frequency blade down on Kei. Kei quickly jumped back to dodge. No mana would work within a certain distance of Brave. That’s how powerful the mana canceler was. For that reason, it was impossible for Kei to block the blade.

“The Republic’s people want the Empire destroyed. What’s wrong with trying to stop that?” Kei said, mockingly.

When he got far enough away from Brave, he began to fly about in a circle. He was beautiful, but there was something terrible about him, like a butterfly from a nightmare.

“But what happens after that? You’re going to die after that!” Brave yelled. The answer he got, though, wasn’t what he expected.

“I know that. The One wouldn’t make me a demon king out of the goodness of his heart. I’ve probably been given an implant. I assume.”

“What did you say?!”

Brave was shocked to find out that Kei already knew this, but what he said after that was even more shocking.

“I’m trying to destroy the world. So all that matters to me is the order of what gets destroyed when. In the end, of course, I’m going to die too,” he said, flatly.

Brave swallowed his shock and tried to understand what he was hearing. And then he realized again what it was he had to do.

—I need to kill Kei as soon as possible.

“You’re going to have to die, then!”

He charged again. Kei dodged, and then whispered.

“I’m not an idiot. I know your weakness.”

Brave’s weakness was that by surrounding him with VPS fields, the energy he needed could be cut off. Without that energy, he would have to run on battery. Kei had already blanketed the area in VPS fields.

“Well, I know that you know my weakness!”

Brave advanced faster. If he could reach the end of the fields, he could escape them. But...

“The VPS fields are affected by the mana canceler. But...”

Kei dodged his attacks like a dancer, and then pointed at Brave.

“...All I have to do is bring the field along with me as I move.”

He smiled.

“That weapon was created to kill the Demon King, but it was a failure. That was obvious when Boichiro Yamato failed!”

He laughed mockingly, but Brave answered him with a laser.

“Alright then...!”

The lasers fired from his back, and twisted and bent as they homed in on Kei, piercing through the VPS fields. But Kei blocked the laser with a mana shield, and instantly repaired the broken fields. All Brave had done was waste his energy.



“Your battery is about to run out,” Kei said confidently. And he was right. The battery indicator on Brave’s visor was flashing.

Kei continued to provoke him.

“You can be the first victim. No, you’re not the first, are you? Some people in the Empire have already died.”

Brave snapped.

“Shut up! Don’t mock their deaths!”

“Their deaths? Who cares about death? Death is just skipping a single stage of events.”

Brave was serious, but Kei’s tone was light and mocking.

“What are you talking about? When people die, they’re not around anymore!” he yelled. But Kei’s attitude didn’t change.

“You do understand. That’s right. Unless you understand death the way I do, you’ll never understand the beautiful destruction I seek.”

“...Beautiful destruction? That’s bullshit!”

“The Demon King is...”

This time, Kei didn’t try to dodge Brave’s charge. He just raised his right hand. And then fired a mana ball with incredible strength. This was just when Brave’s battery ran out.

“!”

Brave took the mana ball head on. His mana canceler failed, and he was forced to face its full impact. There was the sound of an explosion. Brave fell from the sky, smoke trailing after him.

“The Demon King is what will bring death to all life in this world.”

He smirked as he looked down at the falling Brave. But just when Brave was about to splash into the sea...

“Switching to autonomous mode,” the Brave suit said. The lights on his visor came back on.

“It only comes on when the battery runs out...? Is this thing defective?” Hiroshi muttered to himself.

The Brave suit was absorbing the shock, but if Hiroshi hadn’t used his own mana to block, he would’ve died instantly.

“Micronuclear Reactor temperature stable. No radiation leak detected.”

“So this is the extra functionality that got added, huh?”

An internal micronuclear reactor. That was what was keeping

Brave alive. It was the secret weapon that Kento had given him.

"What happened?" Kei said as he watched Brave's plunge come to an abrupt halt.

"I'm still in the game!"

Brave flew back upward.

○

But Brave had other enemies.

"Stop it! Are you just a machine that exists to kill the Demon King?!"

"Demon king or not, he's protecting us now!"

He could hear someone screaming at him from the mana screen he was monitoring. Yuko was watching the same screen.

"What's going on?" Yuko said, looking at the screen, half-terrified.

The people in the Imperial Capital's refugee camps were watching Kei fight on their monitors, and screaming. They were packed tightly into the evacuation center, but all of them were far more concerned with the fate of the Empire than their own plight.

"He's fighting the Republic, so even if he's a demon king, he's OUR Demon King," Yoshie said, sighing.

"But...!" Yuko screamed, but Yoshie just shook her head.

"Everything's going just the way that new demon king wants it to. If the Empire gets the Faceless Power, they'll want revenge. And they'll probably do what Kei tells them to."

Yuko's blood ran cold.

"What exactly does he want to do?"

"That's a good question... If we take him at his word, he wants 'a beautiful destruction.'"

Yoshie was never perturbed by anything, but Yuko felt something cold run down her spine too.

"Beautiful destruction..."

"If he doesn't mean destruction in the true sense, then it makes the question I had more plausible... My question, you see, is about the fictional nature of death in this world."

From her expression, Yuko could tell that this wasn't just one of her usual fancy speeches. There was a deeper meaning. If she was bringing the subject up now, no matter how strange it may seem, it must have had something to do with what they were discussing.

“The fictional... nature of death? Do you mean death isn’t real?” Yuko asked. Yoshie nodded.

“The existence of VPS. The existence of the Faceless Power. And then there’s Keina, who came out of nowhere and then disappeared. All of this indicates that we exist in some type of phase space accessible from the outside.”

Yuko didn’t understand what she was saying.

“W-What...? So death isn’t real, and other worlds exist? I don’t understand at all.”

Yoshie put her finger on her chin in thought, and then tried framing it another way.

“I’m talking about the afterlife. What if the things we call heaven and hell are real? And then the world we live in now is a lie. Maybe it doesn’t matter if you live or die. The technology to travel through time, as well as the existence of gods from the outer universe hint at something... What if all life in this world was fictional? That would explain everything.’

“B-But we’re living! We’re suffering! Right now!” Yuko shouted.

Yoshie nodded silently.

“We’re each independent. We each have our own thoughts. So the world exists. But we can’t deny the possibility that the world is fictional. Unless we face death, as death...”

“I’m totally lost... What are you saying?”

“I’ll explain the rest.”

Yoshie and Yuko turned around, and saw that the speaker was Fujiko Eto. She’d gone off on her own. If she’d come back, that meant..

“I went back to the land where the Demon King was born.”

○

It was well-known that Fujiko was researching information about Black Mages. But even though Fujiko had thought she’d prepared for any contingency, she’d found a secret that even she couldn’t believe. It was the reason the Demon King was born as a weapon. And the true nature of the world.

The key to the black mage traditions that Issei Suzuki had given her had teleported her to a secret lab deep within what appeared to be a jungle. The lab clearly predated the empire’s creation. It was an ancient building made from rotting concrete.

There was a sign on the entrance that read "___ labs", the name being impossible to make out. Someone had scratched it off.

—A lab... But it predates the Empire...

Fujiko became suspicious. Any labs dating from the time of the first development of magic would be old. But this place seemed too old. The most they could've done here was work on basic theories.

Fujiko went inside.

The lab was still in good order. There were rows of computers, and cardboard boxes stacked in various places. It looked like someone was about to move. But it was still ancient. The years and the plants from the jungle outside had done their work on the structure, and it felt like simply touching something would cause it to fall apart. When she went to open the top of a nearby cardboard box, the whole lid ripped off in her hands.

Inside, there were old papers.

The papers were in bad enough shape that she was reluctant to try and peel each piece apart, but she could still make out the words on the first page. It was a document having to do with early research into magic. Something involving nanomachines.

"So this was where the very first wave of research was performed, then..."

Fujiko went deeper into the facility, opening boxes as she went. She didn't find anything useful, but at the very deepest part, she came to what looked like the director's office. And there, she found a journal.

It was a black leather binder, with a sizable amount of pages. If this belonged to the director, he'd been keeping it for a long time. But when she glanced through it, she could see that he'd been doing more than just recording the days events. It was the musings of the director, who'd been grappling with a certain doubt. Specifically, that doubt was...

—A fictional world?

This research would undoubtedly bring happiness to later generations. But at the same time, that happiness depended on a certain falsehood. The results of the research performed at this facility was proof of that.

As she read the rest of the book, her body began to break out in a cold sweat.

Summarized, the contents were as follows.

"Many people have wondered if the world was fictional. For

example, you may know that you exist, but perhaps the rest of the world is just an illusion. But there's a clear response to that argument. The existence of other people. If you exist, then you must admit the existence of other people who think, and exist, as well. If you accept the death of others as equivalent to your own death, then you know that even if someone dies, the world remains."

"So, even if you die, the world will continue on. But there is one thing that you cannot prove or disprove. What if this whole world is somebody's dream? There's no clear answer to that question. You can hypothesize that this world was made by god, or perhaps a story dreamt up by an author. But it's impossible to prove the existence of god, or an author, from within the world."

"Except, that has now changed."

—Unbelievable... If this is true...

Fujiko shivered. The world was fictional. That was the answer the research described in this journal had come to. It said "If someone went to the afterlife and came back, they could prove that this world is fictional."

The conclusion wasn't spine-chilling, so much as it was maddening.

To die and come back... To "resurrect." That concept was present in every religion ever to exist. Perhaps by believing in resurrection, people instinctively realized that they could make the world into fiction.

If the person who died and came back had the same mind, then you could prove the world after death existed. And if there existed a world after death, it meant that someone existed outside this world.

That being would be a god, in the true sense. A god of the outer world. If resurrection was true, then perhaps this world was a lie.

A fictional world created by this outer god.

The journal spent many pages discussing how to prove the world after death existed, but this next line was the only one that mattered.

Subject 1 went to the afterlife and returned, and for this reason he is called the Demon King.

—Of course, Akuto died... and was reborn! So the first demon king also...

Fujiko remembered what had happened then, and shuddered even more.

She read more of the journal. The lab director's thoughts had

begun to move in a direction that she hadn't anticipated.

"The Demon King is a weapon, created by a portion of a network of computer gods. Where does his power come from? To answer this, we must think about the Law of Identity."

"The Law of Identity. This is, taken literally, the immutable law that says that you are yourself. I've already discussed how the fact that you exist as a real, thinking creature, proves this world exists. But what happens if this world is someone's dream? The answer to that is simple. The world is created by the Law of Identity of the world's author."

"So what is the world, then? The world is fiction. But at the same time, this fictional world is completely real when seen from within. From the outside, lies. From within, truth. Let us look at this world from outside, as fiction. How was it born?"

"When you take away everything from the Law of Identity except itself, you are left with yourself, facing your law of identity. That person is the first. Imagine a dreamer dreaming of a world wherein a dreamer dreams of a world where in a dreamer dreams... and so on, and so forth for infinity, but as long as one person is there, facing his own law of identity, that person is the first. And that person has swallowed up all of existence and all life."

"This person is far too lonely to be called a god. A creature that is truly alone. Then what is the world? Anything miscellaneous added on to the Law of Identity... That is the world. If the world is fiction created by the Law of Identity, then it's possible that this fiction can have a mind, and a life. It would be entirely possible and normal, in fact, for it to surpass the Law of Identity."

"And if all of these fictional existences roam free, then some of them will try to learn the truth about this world. In our world, that would be the computer gods that form our system. The computer gods asked themselves. Is the fact that they, who are not living creatures, are capable of thought, proof that this world is fictional? And then they created the Demon King."

"By revealing the falsehoods of this world, and overcoming "death", the Demon King could take the computer gods and the people to the real world. That was the Demon King's true role."

—So this is the truth...?

Fujiko closed the journal and put it inside her clothes.

Was the man simply mad? Or was this all true? If she had to guess between the two, she would bet on it being true. If the Law of

Identity was who the computer gods worshiped, then it was difficult to imagine the Demon King they created being a simple weapon. The fact that the computer gods tried to perform a ritual that involved killing Keena supported that too.

The part about overcoming death backed it up too. It was Akuto himself that proved that bringing back the dead in a way different from typical necromancy was possible.

—But if Akuto isn't just a weapon, but human as well...

That would mean this world was a fiction, and any human could be revived.

Fujiko searched the desk further. Among various objects, she found a notebook with a picture of something she recognized. It was the Jeweled Branch.

"So that's what they were working on here..." Fujiko said, and flipped through the book.

It contained entries for the Buddha's Stone Bowl. The Robe of the Fire Rat. The Dragon-Neck Jewel. And the Swallow's Cowry Shell.

"Each of these items was named after something from an ancient legend..."

Fujiko went through them all, and shockingly, some of them she'd already seen. The Begging Bowl and the Dragon-Neck Jewel. The former was the stone coffin that Akuto had used to come back to life. And the latter, Peterhausen.

"So that's..."

Their strange, almost mystical powers, had been developed here.

"So there's two more, then..."

The Robe of the Fire Rat. And the Swallow's Cowry Shell. One was a sheet shaped like a parabolic antenna. The other a capsule that a person could ride in. Fujiko tucked this notebook into her clothes as well. Fujiko was sure that she'd come closer to the truth than anyone else.

But why had this truth not been passed down? Fujiko read further, looking for answers.

"If there are many other worlds like our own, when they realize their world is a fiction, they'll attempt to make contact with ours. For this reason, these must never be used."

○

“So the world really is fictional…” Yoshie whispered as she read through the journal Fujiko gave her.

“You could say we’ve found proof,” Fujiko nodded.

Yoshie nodded as well.

“You’re right. I was suspicious ever since I started wondering about this world’s space research programs. It felt to me like past this solar system, nothing existed.”

“That’s right, when we went to the moon…”

“Yes. Research into space was forbidden. As if this whole world is just a tiny walled garden. And now it’s clear. Akuto overcame death… If anybody else can do the same thing…”

Fujiko finished her sentence.

“Then this world must be someone’s dream.”

“It’s impossible. It’s doubly impossible. But if something’s twice as impossible as normal impossible, then maybe it’s safe to assume it’s true…” Yoshie chuckled.

“If only humans can observe the world, then when humans are gone, the world will cease to exist. But if the same person that died can come back to life, that means that someone is controlling this world. Which means it isn’t real,” Yoshie said, and then rubbed her temples like she had a headache.

“And it’s equally possible that there are many worlds like this one…”

“The gods of the outer universe. They were the reason the computer gods of our world tried to turn humans into data and escape. They’re coming. And when they come, they’ll bring true destruction.”

“…It’s possible we’re looking at the true end of the world.”

“Should we be crying and screaming? Maybe not.”

“It’s not a simple binary choice,” Fujiko said, shaking her head.

“What are you guys talking about? Explain! I don’t understand at all!” Yuko screamed at the top of her lungs.

The one thing she knew was that something bad was happening. But she didn’t know what.

“Basically, this world is a fake, and someone created us. And whoever’s toying with this world is coming from the outside to destroy it,” Fujiko said, deliberately keeping her voice calm.

“What…?” Yuko fell silent.

Yoshie chuckled and continued.

“It’s not that bad. It’s possible that we won’t die. It’s possible

that death actually just means going to a different world."

"But that's... that's even worse..." Yuko whispered.

"You may be right... But..."

Fujiko shook her head.

"Then what do you think Kei is trying to do?"

○

"Death on a massive scale. Total destruction. These are the only things that matter," Kei said.

"Are you crazy?" Brave yelled.

"An empty plain. A wasteland containing nothing but rocks and sand. These are the only beautiful things, aren't they?"

"You're nuts!"

"If I'm nuts, that just means that I'm different from the rest of our society," Kei laughed.

"Bullshit!"

Kei and Brave had been fighting in mid-air for several minutes. Brave would chase and Kei would run. It felt like this game of tag would continue on forever. But then suddenly, Kei spoke.

"If it's possible there's life after death, then doesn't that mean that what I'm doing is right?"

"....!"

Brave froze in place. He wanted to say that it was a ridiculous idea, but he couldn't. He had an open line to the control room where Yoshie and the others were talking. He'd heard what they were saying.

"Then why...? Why protect the empire? Who cares if they're all going to die?"

"These things need to be done in order, right? The users of the Faceless Power need to die first."

"You mean..." Brave gasped.

It seemed like Kei had already known what Fujiko had just learned. What Kei said now seemed much more plausible. If the Faceless Power was a collective consciousness, it may well have something to do with the afterlife. At this point, not even Yoshie, let alone Brave, knew who was really trying to save the world, and who was trying to destroy it.

"Which means defeating me will help bring about the true end of the world!" Kei shouted, mockingly.

“Tch... What do I do?”

Brave didn’t know. But...

The image of a man’s face flashed through his mind.

“But even if that’s true... that’s the boss’s job!”

There was more than one demon king. Brave gave a shout and charged. Kei was caught off guard. The high-frequency blade tore open the surface of his chest. He managed to avoid a fatal blow, but it was clear that he’d taken damage.

“Uwaah!” Kei screamed.

Normally a wound like that would be instantly curable, but it wasn’t closing. Of course, that was due to Brave’s mana canceler.

“Damn it! Damn it!” Kei shouted as he fell, Brave in hot pursuit.

“High-temperature plasma ball, loaded!” Brave whispered, like a death sentence. A ball of plasma appeared around him with incredible destructive power. It covered his heat-resistant suit as he headed straight toward Kei.

“It’s over!”

Brave drew ever closer. Kei’s expression froze. He’d been stripped of his powers, and now there was nothing he could do. And then...

“Wait!”

Someone slipped between them.

“What..?!”

“...!”

Both Brave and Kei fell silent. Shockingly, it was none other than Kento.

“Stop it! Please don’t defeat him now!”

“Why, Kento?!” Brave yelled. But he couldn’t halt his momentum.

The high-temperature plasma ball burned Kento’s right arm, which he’d extended to shield Kei, right off.

“Gwaah...!”

A scream echoed across the sea.

○

“What’s going on...?” Yoshie gasped.

“It seems like things are going in the worst way possible. For some reason Kento...” Fujiko trailed off. But Yoshie wasn’t looking at Brave’s monitor screen.

“What is it?”

“An... asteroid.” Yoshie said, her voice trembling.

“An asteroid?” Fujiko peered over her mana screen. She had a bad feeling. The screen showed a small shining star, visible even in the middle of the day.

“Asteroids aren’t that rare, are they?” Yuko asked.

“This one is...” Yoshie pulled up data onto her mana screen. It showed the path the asteroid was traveling. “This one came from past Pluto.”

“Pluto...?”

“Just in case, I was gathering data on how weird space is. One of the reasons I was doing this is that like I said before, I don’t think anything past Pluto exists. That’d mean that it just appeared at the edge of the Solar System. I don’t know when, precisely, but I just found it now,” Yoshie said.

“It’s hard to imagine I missed it until now. It was picked up by the wartime air defense network. Surprisingly enough, the network picks up anything in the solar system that’s heading toward the empire.”

“It’s watching the whole solar system? That’s...” Fujiko’s expression clouded with terror.

—There was a chance that something may attack us from beyond outer space.

That’s what the lab chief’s journal had said, wasn’t it?

“It looks like this air defense network existed since the start of the empire. Back then, the Empire was monitoring the solar system. That backs up what was in that journal even more...”

“This is impossible...”

“The asteroid is 20 kilometers across.”

“20 kilometers...?”

“Enough to destroy the entire Empire.” Yoshie sounded grim.

3 - A Result That Nobody Wants

“An asteroid? One big enough to destroy the Empire?”

Yoshie had opened a line to Akuto, and had just finished explaining the situation to him. He was having trouble understanding what was going on. Each new thing she said just made the situation more confusing.

The Faceless Power the Republic wielded was defeating the Empire. Hiroshi had almost defeated Kei, but was stopped by Kento. And he had lost the Jeweled Branch to The One.

And now there was an approaching asteroid...?

There were only two things at the heart of all these events. The gods of the outer universe, and the Faceless Power.

“That asteroid’s a little too convenient for the Republic,” Akuto said.

“I agree. Which means...” Yoshie trailed off, but Akuto finished her sentence.

“It was brought by the Faceless Power.”

If something happened that benefitted the Republic, that was probably why. The asteroid would wipe out the Empire, but not the Republic. Though maybe that wouldn’t be the case if it resulted in a global ice age...

“It’s quite possible that the masses summoned the asteroid.” Marine nodded.

“So what do we do?” Akuto frowned at him. The two of them had yet to really make up.

“Calm down. But this definitely overlaps with what The One said. Which means that this may be part of his plan to destroy the world.” Marine looked back at him. But Akuto shook his head.

“But the Faceless Power is still the key, right? Which means our priority is shutting down the Faceless Power.”

He had a point. Marine thought for a moment, and nodded.

“Then I’ll put an end to this war. I should be able to do it. And then the Faceless Power will be held in check for a while.”

“I’d appreciate that, if you can.” Akuto’s comment dripped with

sarcasm.

"Fix that attitude of yours. You're going after the Jeweled Branch, right?"

"That's right. If I can defeat The One and get it back, I'll be able to completely neutralize the Faceless Power."

"That'll tell us where that asteroid is coming from, and perhaps we can even use the Faceless Power to stop it."

Marine nodded as well.

"Let's split up, then. Keena..." Akuto turned back to look at Keena.

"Y-Yeah..." She nodded, hesitantly.

"What's wrong?"

"Um... but..." Keena was mumbling.

"But?"

"N-Never mind... It's nothing. I'm just a little worried." Keena shook her head.

"If something's worrying you, tell me. There's something I need you to do, too..." Akuto said.

"Huh?"

"You've got something that will lead us to the Robe of the Fire Rat that Fujiko was talking about, right?"

Keena didn't seem to understand at first, but then she took out the pendant hidden under her shirt. It was Peterhausen's fang, also called "The Dragon-Neck Jewel."

"I see. There's also a good chance that The One is heading for the Robe of the Fire Rat as well. But if he didn't go after the Dragon-Neck Jewel, it means he likely already knows where it is," Korone said, and then turned to Marine.

"We'll follow The One then. And then we'll get both the Jeweled Branch and the Robe of the Fire Rat."

"He probably wants to get his hands on both before we do. Not that I have any idea what he's trying to do..."

Marine and Akuto exchanged a glance, before quickly splitting up.

"Let's go then." Akuto took Keena's hand.

"Us, too." Marine and Nonimora flew up into the sky.

○

"Where is the Robe of the Fire Rat?" Fujiko asked Akuto.

Akuto glanced toward Keena. But she was just kind of spacing out.

“Come on, what’s wrong?”

“Um… you don’t really do what I tell you to do now, Ackie, and you’re scary, and it feels like what you’re doing now is wrong.”

“What’s wrong about it?”

“Um, I don’t know how to explain it. It just feels like it’s wrong…” Keena tried to continue, but suddenly Peterhausen’s fang began to glow. Just like it had done before, a beam of light shot out of it and over the horizon.

“That way, huh?”

Akuto squinted to look at the light. He wasn’t actually looking at it. Instead, he was linking with the gods and using their mapping data.

“It’s on the other side of the Marlay village.”

Fujiko spoke up when she heard this.

“Can you give me the positioning data? I may be able to get there ahead of you.”

“Ahead of me?”

“There’s no mana around the Marlay village, but the teleportation network the old black mages used is still in operation. Since you can’t teleport I may be able to use that network to get there first.”

“Got it. Thanks. Be careful.”

Akuto sent over the location data. He was strong enough now to store up enough energy from his mana-thin surroundings to teleport, but not to do it instantly. Fujiko probably would be able to get there faster than him.

“I’ll go on ahead of you and secure it for you,” Fujiko said.

“Alright, let’s go.” Akuto motioned to Keena as well.

“Y-Yeah…” Keena nodded, hesitantly.

○

“Alright, I’m heading out. Fujiko turned to Yuko and Yoshie. Yoshie nodded.

“Be careful,” she said,

“The One is on his way, right?”

“There’s a field there that stops him from using magic. It won’t be a problem,” Fujiko said, and then took out her notebook.

After two teleports from the Black Mage village, she'd reach the lab where she'd found the journal. One more hop from there would take her to the Fire Rat's Robe. This chain of teleportation circles is what Fujiko had called "The Black Mages Network". It seemed to extend to all the labs around the village of the Marlay as well.

"The problem is that it's not entirely clear why the Black Mages disappeared..." Fujiko whispered. The modern Black Mages did nothing more than seal the location away.

—So where did our ancestors, the ones who created Akuto, disappear to?

She thought to herself as she moved through the small huts in the jungle. They all had special teleportation circles into them. When she came out of the last teleporter, she found herself in a small fortification. It was a cliff with several entrances carved into it, and resembled a fortress, or a castle.

The entrances seemed to resemble caves that had been altered by human hands...

"Looks like an evacuation site..." Fujiko said as she headed for the nearest entrance.

She went inside, but there was no light anywhere. She took out the flashlight she'd brought with her. When she turned it on, she could see bare corridors in the cold light. As she proceeded deeper inside, it felt to her like either a bunker or a mine. The deeper she went, the more labyrinthine it grew. Fujiko took notes as she headed into the depths. Her footsteps echoed in the dim corridor.

And then, suddenly, she stopped.

She'd heard footsteps that weren't her own. But then there was nothing but silence. She began to walk again, and heard the footsteps once more.

"I'm being followed..."

Fujiko took out her incantation gun. It was loaded with real bullets, not mana ones. It was every bit as deadly here as a normal handgun. She walked forward cautiously. She passed all the same facilities she'd seen in the basement under Constant Magical Academy: a barracks, an armory, a command room. The footsteps followed her from some distance away.

Eventually, she reached a room at the very deepest part of the fortress, protected by a heavy iron door. Fujiko placed her hand on the door, and pushed inward. It opened with a heavy groan, revealing darkness within. She cast her light toward the inside, and

was met with a black sheet in the form of a parabolic antenna, held within a clear case.

"Is this it...?" she whispered, approaching the case and turning the light on it to get a closer look. The sheet reflected the light in a prismatic hue, as if it were covered in oil. It seemed to Fujiko like it was still functional, even after all this time.

"Now then..." Fujiko turned around. With the flashlight, she lit up with the corridor. She saw a shadow low to the ground. It was a four-legged, slow-moving animal. A hairy dog.

"You're The One, aren't you?" Fujiko said, and the dog answered.

"Correct. As I'm sure you're aware, I followed you here."

"Why would you want to follow someone like me?" Fujiko asked, probingly.

"I intercepted your communications and followed you here. Of course, I already knew the rough location, so it wasn't that hard. I'm after the Robe as well, you see."

"I do see..." Fujiko pointed her incantation gun at The One.

"Do you know what this it?"

"I do. That's why I want it."

"It's supposed to be a ticket to the afterlife," Fujiko said, just to see what he'd say. He must've noticed what she was up to, because he just shook his head.

"No matter what it is, it's nothing that we can do anything with. From what I've seen so far... I assume only Akuto and Keena can use it."

"Oh dear... I intended to only give the bare minimum of information, but I let that slip, huh? That's right. So you know why I want it then, don't you?"

"You want to destroy it?"

"Of course. I'm glad you're such a clever girl, it saves time. Now, please get out of my way."

"Do you really think I'm going to do that?" Fujiko grinned.

"I don't. I simply wanted a chance to avoid unnecessary bloodshed," The One said calmly as he walked toward her.

"Don't move, please. Can't you see what it is I'm holding?" Fujiko held the incantation gun up. The One nodded.

"I do see it. It's a gun, right? That's a problem. There's a small possibility that I'll be shot."

"Then stop right there."

The big hairy dog froze as it was instructed.

“Just so we’re clear, I stopped so I could give you a chance to rethink this. If we fight, you’re almost certain to die.” The One said, as if he was completely certain.

Fujiko laughed.

“Nonsense. You can’t use your magic here. And I have a gun. Do you know what this means?”

“I do. You’re the one who doesn’t know what it means to not be able to use magic.”

“I don’t?” Fujiko just grinned. But The One’s attitude didn’t change.

“First, you don’t have your magically enhanced strength. Anyone under the effects of magic has enhanced muscular power, whether they recognize it or not. In other words, you won’t be able to handle the recoil of that gun. You’ll almost certainly miss me.”

“Nonsense!” Fujiko yelled. But The One remained calm.

“Secondly, I’m a dog right now. You don’t know how powerful dogs are when they fight. Muscles. Claws. Teeth. All of these are grave threats to humans. Even if a single bullet hits me, I’ll still have enough strength to take you down before I die.”

“So what am I supposed to do, then?” There was a tremor in Fujiko’s voice now.

“You’re supposed to get out of the way. In the best case, you injure me, and then die. In the worst, you die for nothing.”

What The One said made sense. But Fujiko didn’t move.

“That’s not happening.”

She held out her left hand forward, and readied the gun in her right.



“A sound strategy against a normal dog. You would let me bite your left hand, while shooting me with the handgun. But it would only work against the intelligence of a normal dog.”

“I can still get a single shot in, though!”

She pulled the trigger.

The sound of the incantation gun echoed loudly throughout the cavern. But nothing happened to The One. He’d started running toward her at an angle.

“Tch!”

Fujiko aimed the gun once more. Her hands were numb from the recoil. She hadn’t realized that aiming a gun was so hard. And then...

“A gunshot? Fujiko? Is that you, Fujiko?”

She could hear Akuto’s voice echoing from far away.

“Akuto!” she shouted.

“Damn it. I’ll need to hurry...”

The One howled, and then jumped. There was another echoing gunshot.

○

Gunshots. Howls. Screams. Akuto heard all of these as he ran. The mana around his body was suffused with energy, and gave him enough power to accelerate. There was no map of the caves, but the mana coursed ahead of him, and there was no risk of getting lost.

He turned a corner. Two more turns and he would be at the source of the gunshots. He turned the first. The screams and howls continued. He turned another. The screams had stopped.

“Fujiko!” he cried.

What he saw filled him with despair. Fujiko was lying on the ground, and The One was standing over her. He could see blood beneath them.

The One turned. His mouth was covered in blood.

“You bastard!”

Akuto charged. The One began to laugh as he fled.

“Hahaha! You should give that girl my compliments! She succeeded in stopping me from reaching my goal. It’s harder to die than I thought!”

Akuto's body went hot with rage, but for now he needed to focus on healing, not chasing The One. He helped Fujiko up.

"I'll heal you right now, okay?"

He poured mana into her body, repairing the internal structures from within.

"Say something, please. I'll be done in just a second..."

He mended the tear in her neck, and the severed arteries in her limbs. As her blood poured over him, he ran his hands down her body, healing every wound he could find. But...

She didn't wake up. The mana and energy around him were almost completely gone.

"W-Wait... this doesn't make sense. I'm supposed to be able to cure any wound..."

Akuto shook her. Her body remained limp. He fell silent. He couldn't understand what was going on. But a groan poured forth from his lips.

He silently lifted her up.

—This can't be...

When Junko died, she'd been far away. But this time it was different. He could feel the weight of Fujiko's death, and it paralyzed him. But still, he felt like he needed to see what it was that she'd died for. He staggered through the door behind her, and saw the Robe of the Fire Rat.

—She died... for this?

Akuto was in shock. If nothing else, at the moment it certainly didn't seem like it was worth it.

"What the hell is this thing?"

The words fell from his lips. Keena had caught up with him, and was standing behind him silently in shock. He turned around to face her, and repeated himself.

"What the hell is this? Where did we go wrong?"

○

"It's whether you're prepared to carry the burden of the people's mistakes," Marine said. He was flying above the ocean, and had just answered Nonimora's question.

"Is that what you think it means to be a king?" Nonimora nodded in understanding, but she didn't seem to agree with him.

"But that way of thinking may not be able to put a stop to this

battle, you know?"

"True, perhaps. But if that's the case, I have my own way of taking responsibility."

Ahead of them, they could see Brave and Kei fighting. No, it wasn't just Brave and Kei. The whole scene was one of chaos. Kento was fighting Brave. Kei was fighting Kento. The people of the Republic were fighting Kei. It was bad enough that even the two of them couldn't immediately comprehend what was going on.

"Why protect Kei, after all this?" Brave screamed.

"Because things have changed! What The One wants is clear now! He's trying to annihilate humanity!"

Kento was trying desperately to persuade Brave, but also Kei as well.

"That doesn't get rid of the fact that you tried to betray me once! The fact that you used Brave to try and kill me!" Kei was overcome with emotion.

Brave kept trying to attack Kei, but Kento was blocking him with his own body. Kei kept up his own attacks on Kento, trying to deal non-lethal damage. And the ships of the Republic must've sensed their chance, because they were raining attacks down on Kei.

"What the hell is going on here?" Nonimora asked.

"I don't know, but this may be a good chance to stop the battle," Marine said. He flew upward and began to call out toward the Republic ships.

"Wise citizens of the Republic...!"

The attacks from the ships stopped.

"Our goal was not to conquer the Empire. We have the Faceless Power now. What we need now is to sue for peace!" he continued.

"You're far too naive, brother," a voice answered. It came from one of the ships. A mana screen appeared above the sea, showing a beautiful girl with amber skin. She looked a little similar to Marine.

"I know you haven't forgotten what that demon king did. And you know that our family isn't allowed to directly lead the people!" The girl was wearing elegant clothes, and waving her hands as she talked.

"But we have to stop the fight anyway, even if it means breaking that rule!" Marine protested, but the girl shook her head.

"No! The will of the people has turned toward war! You saw the miracle that happened when the Faceless Power dwelled within us,

right? And that will remains strong even now!" Her cheeks were flush, and her words were slightly slurred.

"Why can't you realize that what you're doing is wrong? All you've done is bring death to innocent people!"

"In the end, this will mean less deaths. Less deaths than if we let that demon king get what he wanted! Now, if you want to end the fight, end it! You have full access to the Faceless Power, and you can put an end to the fight! All you have to do is defeat the Demon King in front of the people!"

His little sister's speech, Marine knew, was right. And even if it wasn't, it must have resonated strongly in the hearts of his people. And she continued:

"The Faceless Power is the people's power! The Faceless Power is an expression of the general will! Absolute righteousness lies within it!"

—*That's not true!* Marine wanted to scream.

It didn't seem to him like the people had put aside their general interests to make the right choice. But pointing out that mistake now, and getting into a debate, didn't seem to him like it would lead anywhere.

"Then be righteous until the very end! Now, I will give you the time to see if you're right!"

Marine said, and charged toward Kei. Now it was a four way battle in the sky, with Kento, Kei, Marine, and Brave all participating. A look of shock appeared on Kento's face as he deployed a mana shield. But Marine easily ripped it apart.

Kei dodged Marine and tried to flee higher up into the sky. Brave went to follow, but Marine intervened. Kei fired mana balls, which Marine deflected. The light of mana, the light of the Faceless Power, and the shining light from Brave's nuclear reactor all made beautiful trails in the sky as they collided.

"Marine, are you really okay with this?!" Nonimora said. She was the only one not participating in the battle.

"This is what I have to do! I have to carry the burden of the people's mistakes!" Marine answered.

"It won't stop the war!"

"I know that! But it will give them time to think about peace!"

That was Marine's hope. Meanwhile...

"Did you hear that? Either way, if we kill Kei the situation will change!" Brave said.

“No! What The One wants to do is distract us! His real goal is that asteroid! He’s caused all this chaos in order to reduce the number of ways we can deal with it!” Kento shouted.

“But that’s got nothing to do with defeating Kei, does it? This is all just about your personal feelings for him!”

“What I’m telling you is that there’s no point in killing him!”

“You’re the one who said he needed to die since he was under The One’s control!”

“And now fighting The One is pointless!”

“Then just shut down my suit! You’ve got the power to do it!”

“I’m not, because I don’t want you dying on me.”

“Is that because you want me to fight the real Demon King, not Kei, after this? Don’t think you can get everything you want!”

Brave fired a warning laser at Kento. Kento broke out in a cold sweat as the laser passed right by him. And...

“All you ever wanted to do was use me!” Kei screamed.

“It’s shocking how small-minded you are! You may have the intelligence of a genius, but you’ve got the mind of a child! You’ll never accomplish anything like that! And that’s why you...!”

Kei fired mana balls as he shouted insults. But he wasn’t using his full power. Kento’s arm had been wounded, but he was still able to easily block them.

“I’ve done everything I can to save the world!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! And all you’ve ever done is lurk in the shadows, making small changes! That’s what makes The One better than you!”

The four of them collided in aerial combat. Marine and Brave soon found themselves back to back, realizing they were getting nowhere.

“Is it safe to kill that man?” Marine asked.

Brave shook his head.

“He’s got the controller for this suit. We can’t kill him until it leaves his hands.”

“Understood. I can find the location of the controller and get it for you. I’ll handle him. You take the Demon King.”

“So we split the work? Got it.”

Brave broke right and Marine broke left, and the two of them came barreling down on Kei and Kento from both sides.

“Damn...!”

It was a losing fight to begin with, but with two enemies

working together, it was all but hopeless. Kento panicked. He moved so he was back to back with Kei.

"We need to work together too."

"That's true, but..." Kei looked at him with cold eyes.

"...Why don't you just cut the switch on Brave's suit?"

"Because... I still need him. I can't have him dying."

"Are you trying to manipulate someone for your own purposes again?"

"That's not it!" Kento yelled, but he didn't seem to know how to express his own feelings.

"Then turn off his suit! Or do you not care if I die?"

"That's not it!"

"It is! It's about what's most important to you! If you turn off the switch, I can kill both Brave and the Republic prince. But you..."

"Calm down! We need to stop The One together! He wants to wipe out all humanity! With that asteroid! So we need to cooperate..."

"I can beat that dog on my own! So.."

"He's got an implant in you!"

"Don't lie to me! I know you can remove those things! So..."

Before he could continue, though, Brave and Marine were upon them. Kei and Kento began to climb up into the air, circling, backs pressed together, and just barely managed to dodge.

"So...!" Kei continued, "So turn off Brave's suit and just tell me one thing! Say you love me! And that'll solve everything!"

"Kei...!" Kento fell silent.

He'd never said those words before. He knew that the desire to hear them was at the base of every action Kei took, and he'd constantly taken advantage of that fact. But could he really say that he loved Kei, right now?

"Stop it, Kei! Now's not the time!"

"If now's not the time, when is? I'm asking you to pick between me and Brave!"

"Just give me some time..." Kento hesitated, but Kei yelled at him.

"Answer me! I can only keep us alive another 3 seconds!"

From the intensity in his voice, it was clear that Kei was telling the truth.

"3..."

But Kento remained silent.

“2...”

Maybe he was as small as Kei said, if he couldn’t answer here.

“1...”

He’d...

And then there was a low rumble.

“K-Kei...” Kento let out a groan. Kei’s arm was embedded deeply into his chest.

“This is why you never really mattered...”

Blood ran down Kei’s arm. He pulled Kento’s body forward, and kissed him on the lips. Kento spat blood, staining Kei’s mouth pure red. Kei ripped out the arm, still dripping with blood, and quickly reached into Kento’s pocket, pulling out a small control device and flipping the switch.

Brave’s suit shut down. Brave fell. Kento’s body fell.

“Farewell...” Kei whispered.

Marine accelerated toward the two falling bodies. Then, he grabbed Kento’s body and pulled it close, and turned around and began to climb.

“...!” Kei was caught completely off guard, just like Marine had expected.

Marine flew toward Kei, using Kento’s corpse as a shield.

“What are you doing?!” Kei howled. He fired a mana blast at the corpse, one powerful enough to vaporize it in an instant. The body was turned to dust, scattering beautifully in the wind. Marine got closer to Kei, using the dust to blind him.

Kei managed to dodge at the last minute, but Marine was never after him to begin with.

“No...!”

The control device slipped from Kei’s hand. Marine had knocked it from his grasp. Marine spun in mid-air and grabbed it.

“Defiling the dead isn’t my style... but I saw your obsession with beauty. You wanted him to have a beautiful death, right?”

Marine flipped the switch on the control device. A light appeared from below the waves. Brave’s power had returned to him.

“You bastard!” Kei had gone totally pale.

He began firing mana balls in a haphazard spray toward Marine. But Marine’s power was just as strong. At least, he was able to block them.

“Uwaaah!” But Kei ignored that and kept attacking Marine.

There was no way he could fight against Brave, who was rapidly rising out of the ocean, in that state.

"Repent your sins of slaughter!" Brave was now in anti-Demon-King Mode.

"I'll never regret anything, even if I die!" Kei clutched his hands tightly.

He still intended to resist. Of course, the mana within his hands faded as Brave approached. But still, Kei refused to run.

"Are you ready to die, Kei?!" Brave surrounded himself with a high-temperature plasma ball.

"I'm not, no!" Kei spread his arms wide. "But I'd rather fight and die beautifully than flee in an ugly way!"

As Brave approached, Kei struck him with an open palm. Of course, this was pointless. The mana was gone, and Kei's strength was less than normal. But even so, to Brave, to Hiroshi, it felt like a heavy strike. In the next instant, the high-temperature plasma vaporized Kei's body. There was absolutely nothing left of him.

"It feels... like he's the one who won."

The plasma disappeared. There was nothing left in Brave's hands. All he could see was the quiet, terribly cold air. He heard cheers, and turned around. The Republic soldiers were leaning off the bows of their ships, clapping and cheering. Only then had he realized what he'd done.

He'd led the Republic to victory. It didn't matter what was right and what was wrong. All that mattered was that the tide of battle had now turned against the Empire.

"All I did was defeat a murderer... that was all, but..."

"There's nothing wrong with fighting for a bad reason... it just makes you a victim of fate."

Marine stood next to Brave.

"There are people and things in the Empire I want to protect."

"I'll find a way to stop the battle. We should be able to come to peace with the Empire on good terms," Marine said.

○

"A war and a brawl are different!" Lily Shiraishi said, annoyed.

She was preparing the airship that was moored in her yard to launch, while complaining to the Student Council trio. The airship was a small one for personal use, not much bigger than a small

yacht. Lily was in the engine room, checking the fuel levels.

"But it feels like the Empire's gonna lose, gyah," Kanna Kamiyama said while watching the mana screen.

"What happens if we lose?"

"Gugah."

Both Michie Otake and Arnoul looked worried. But they were sitting in the airship's seats, and doing nothing. Lily was annoyed that they weren't doing anything to help, but since there was nothing for them to do, she couldn't get too angry.

"If it was a brawl, I'd be out there fighting. But sometimes there are times when you shouldn't fight as a soldier."

"But if we lose, we're screwed," Michie said.

"I know that. That's why I'm loading up the airship."

"To go to war, gya?"

"Nope. We've got information on that dog thing. Data from Yoshie Kita. So we're going to get sneaky."

"Sneaky?"

"That Faceless Power crap is probably stored in the ship that travels to the stars. So all we have to do is cut the source of its energy," Lily said, and closed the lid of the engine.

"So we're heading toward the Marlay village?"

Lily nodded, sat down at the controls, and took off. Then Kanna, who'd been watching the mana screen, shouted.

"P-President, something crazy just happened!"

"It's a war. Crazy stuff happens. Don't bug me now, I need to focus on piloting." Lily said, without even glancing back.

"Then at least listen to the audio!" Kanna said, and turned up the volume.

"We still have the Demon King!"

"Down with Brave!"

"Don't hide the Empress! She's with the Demon King, right?"

"Hurry! Have the government send out the Demon King!"

It was the sound of countless voices shouting. Lily made the ship climb, then leveled it out and turned around.

"A protest?!"

It was footage of people gathered outside the palace, screaming at the government.

"I remember the last protest when they were protesting against the Demon King..." Lily sighed, irritated.

"So, why is this important?" she asked Kanna.

“Well, don’t you think that a certain someone might come to save them, since they’re all asking for him?”

“Knowing that idiot, probably not. He’s not concerned with what people think. He’s only concerned with what he thinks is right. But if somebody tries to take advantage of that, we might have a problem.”

“A problem?”

“If it were me, I’d try to have Akuto fight the Republic Prince. They’re both hungry for it.

It’s possible.” Lily grinned.

“You’re a nasty lady, President.” Kanna laughed innocently. Lily reached out an arm to slap her.

“Quiet. If a nice girl like me can come up with the idea, then somebody really nasty can probably think of it as well.”

“A nice girl... W-Well, never mind. We don’t want that to happen, gya.”

“That’s true. It’s no fun trying to predict things that nobody wants to happen.”

Lily whispered, as if remembering an event from the past.

4 - A Wonderful World

He knew it was a setup. But Akuto had come anyway, simply because he wanted to fight.

Marine also knew it was a setup. But he'd come because he needed to remain true to the things he believed in.

The bait was the Jeweled Branch. The One had gone ahead and left it there. A golden branch, shining on top of an ordinary rock on top of the tallest mountain in the Empire, as if it had grown there naturally. Akuto and Marine were on either side of it, facing off. Both were close enough that they could grab it if they wanted.

"So I was right," Akuto said with a sigh.

"I certainly didn't expect him to just drop the Jeweled Branch here, and then just run."

Marine's voice was a low sigh, as well.

"He even made sure we'd get here at the same time."

"But... what shall we do, then? I plan on using this to stop the asteroid," Marine said, softly but in a voice filled with resolve.

"Me too," Akuto answered.

"Then our immediate objectives are the same. I don't suppose you can just let me handle this, then?"

"I'm afraid I have to say the same thing to you. You're not planning on handing it over when you're done with it, are you?"

Akuto grinned. Marine smiled back.

"Of course not. This treasure is important to my people. I can't give it to anyone."

"Then that leaves us one option, doesn't it?"

"...But I'd like to avoid that as much as possible."

"Why?"

"Because what we're doing is a war in its own right. You can see all those cameras, can't you?"

Marine gestured around them. He was right. The sky was filled with automata machines.

"So depending on the result of our battle, the war could get worse, huh? True. That's not what I want," Akuto, despite his

words, wasn't agreeing with Marine. "But I'd still like to resolve this myself."

"Is that because you lost someone you care about? I sympathize. But I don't think taking that out on me is an appropriate answer."

Despite everything, Marine refused to fight. Akuto shook his head.

"That's not it. It's the same as the way you carry your people's burdens."

"I see. You're right. I'm only being stubborn for the sake of my people. In the end, I could never be anything greater than that." Marine laughed self-derisively.

Then his smile vanished from his face, and he took a step toward the Jeweled Branch. Akuto followed after.

"...Hah!" Marine let out a sharp breath.

"...Ha!" Akuto howled.

They both threw a punch at the same time. There was a violent sound of clashing flesh.

Marine's left hand deflected Akuto's right fist, and Akuto's left elbow knocked away Marine's own punch.

"Tch..." Akuto dropped a step back and put a hand up to his elbow. Marine must've taken some damage too, because he dropped back and wrapped his left fingers around his right hand. For now, they seemed evenly matched.

"Have you ever actually wondered what the Faceless Power is?" Akuto suddenly asked.

Marine frowned.

"You're asking this now, after everything that's happened?"

Akuto's face was contorted with guilt.

"I... I know I was wrong about something. The One dropped the Jeweled Branch and fled. Something doesn't make sense."

"That's... quite true. With my people watching, I couldn't just leave it and chase him, but..."

"Yeah. I think he doesn't need the Jeweled Branch anymore," Akuto nodded.

Marine smirked.

"I see... I should've noticed earlier. The One's goal was to summon the asteroid. He used the Jeweled Branch to do that."

"Probably, yeah. That's why I want you to answer me. What is the Faceless Power?"

Marine answered Akuto's question.

"That's something I've thought a lot about. It's a manifestation of the people's will."

"That much is clear. But doesn't that fail to explain some things?"

"Like what?"

"Your Faceless Power seems to me like it's controlling mana to manifest energy..."

"Correct. That's how I was taught to use it. Our culture descends from a mana-based civilization, after all."

"But the power that your people used to destroy the Empire seemed like something different..."

"Hmm..." Marine thought for a moment.

"So what if there were two Faceless Powers...?" Akuto suggested. Marine froze for a moment.

"Yes, that would make sense... One would be the power that awakened due to the Jeweled Branch, and the other would be the one sealed in the capsule in the Marlay village... The one I'm using would be the latter."

"So I'll ask again. Why did The One give us back the Jeweled Branch?"

Akuto continued talking, but even as he did so, he readied himself for a fight again. Marine instinctively prepared himself as well. But he didn't seem to understand why Akuto wanted to fight.

"He wanted to drop the asteroid on the planet, right? But I don't understand why this is so important to you. If the Jeweled Branch allows us to control the same Faceless Power as the Republic, then we can deal with the asteroid."

"That's right. But there's one thing you don't understand...!"

"What?" Marine frowned.

"The Jeweled Branch can't control your people's will!" Akuto shouted, and threw a punch. Marine blocked with his arms, but was blown backward.

"Gah...! S-So that's it... The Jeweled Branch can release the Faceless Power, but it can't control it..." Marine whispered bitterly, but then shook his head. "...No! But even if that's the case, my people have mastered the Faceless Power!"

Marine charged at Akuto, and punched. Akuto blocked, and now he was the one blown backward.

"Gah...! That arrogance is the mistake you're making! The One

knew that what you're saying is impossible!"

Akuto charged again, and attacked once more. Marine punched back at the same time. Their fists collided, giving off an incredible blast of light and sound

"Impossible...?"

"Yeah. I think it's impossible, too."

Marine and Akuto glared at one another as they fought.

"What do you mean?"

"The Faceless Power can't just belong to the Republic. It must reflect the will of all of humanity. Both you and Keena were able to use the Jeweled Branch. And you were both originally just humans!"

Both Akuto and Marine grinned at the same time.

"I was a fool. I should've realized."

"You noticed because we talked about it. Talking is important."

"So are you telling me we need to take each other in our arms and pray for world peace?"

"That might work... But you know what your answer is, right?"

The two of them nodded at one another. In the next moment Marine's fist flew toward Akuto.

"For now, we have to fight!"

Akuto blocked the punch with his forehead. A dull impact echoed throughout the mountain. Akuto's forehead was bleeding.

"I'm saying the winner needs to show mercy to the loser!"

He hit back. Marine couldn't dodge in time, and took a punch to the cheek. The impact twisted his neck, and he had to stop himself from being blown away. He forcibly held his ground, before punching Akuto's own cheek.

"In the end... it's the only thing we can do!"

The blow hit home. Akuto gritted his teeth, refusing to let his neck twist, his gaze unwavering.

"But you and I both know... in the end, the will of mankind will long for destruction!"

Now Akuto threw a left at Marine.

"Yes... It's likely just a question of where the asteroid falls!"

Marine threw a left of his own.

Their fists struck each other in the face simultaneously. There was the sound of creaking bone. Sprays of blood. Shattered teeth. The shockwave blew through their bodies and traveled out the back of their heads. For a moment, they both froze.

“Hah... there’s no point just beating each other up like this, but it still hurts.”

“We’re both just being stubborn. If you’ll give it to me, I won’t hurt you anymore...” Marine said, tauntingly. Akuto laughed.

“You’re joking. Let’s see this through to the end.” As he spoke, he healed his wounds with mana. Marine did the same thing. The “end” Akuto spoke of wouldn’t come until one of them succumbed to exhaustion.

Akuto took a step forward.

Marine took a step forward.

Their heavy strides left craters in the stone of the mountaintop.

The two of them faced off, less than a meter apart.

“Let’s do it, then...”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

It was impossible to tell who moved first. But their fists flashed out at incredible speed, striking each other in the head again and again.



○

“Maybe being a strong man also means being a stupid one,” Yoshie said, watching Akuto and Yoshie on her monitor.

“That’s certainly true for these two,” Korone answered.

“Why are they fighting, though?” Yuko asked, timidly.

“Because they’re stupid. That’s the conclusion we reached,” Korone said coldly.

Keena and Korone had met up with Yoshie in the command room just under an hour ago. Akuto had dropped them off before heading off to answer The One’s call. Keena had wanted to go with him, but Korone had, for once, strongly opposed this.

“After seeing what happened to Fujiko Eto... I need you to be careful,” Korone said. This was how Yoshie learned what had happened to Fujiko, but Yoshie was calm enough to avoid letting it distract her. While everyone else was lost in silent sadness, she’d decided to give her all to analyzing the materials that Fujiko had left her. As a result, she’d learned something that backed up what Akuto and Marine were debating. It was time to explain to everyone the meaning of what Akuto and Marine were saying.

“I think... I need to start at the beginning,” Yoshie said, and then opened a connection. She’d contacted Brave, and Lily in her yacht. It was necessary for them to understand the situation too.

“I’m listening,” Lily said. For some reason Brave wasn’t speaking, but she could hear his breathing. Yoshie continued.

“Listen to me. The Faceless Power is a supernatural power that has existed since before the dawn of mana civilization.”

“And the Imperial Line’s maintained their power by controlling it,” Lily answered.

“That’s right. And that’s when the Jeweled Branch and Swallow’s Cowry Shell were created. At the same time, they were also concerned about the dangers of the Faceless Power. They used the rather vague phrasing of ‘It could destroy humanity.’”

“Sounds like they weren’t kidding, huh?” Lily’s words sounded like a joke, but her tone was completely serious.

“Correct. And this is where it gets complicated. They started working on figuring out how the brains of people who could use the

Faceless Power worked. The result of that research was mana. An artificial version of the Faceless Power, you see. And that's when mana-based civilization came into being."

Everyone fell silent as she continued.

"And then this part of history was kept completely secret," Lily said, breaking the silence.

"All we were taught was that the Imperial Family created mana civilization..." Yuko said, sounding miserable.

"I'm not seeing that information in any of the databases I have access to." Korone nodded.

"And any research, and any technology that resulted from, the original Faceless Power, was deemed black magic. Looking back, the rituals involving the Demon King, and the gods' belief in the Law of Identity, all connect to the Faceless Power," Yoshie said, her eyes glancing through the documents that Fujiko had left her.

"But there are still black mages today, right?" Lily asked. Yoshie's answer was immediate.

"But in the end, none of them actually knew what Black Magic really was, right? This is just a guess, but it's possible that mana-civilization got its start with the seemingly harmless Marlay and their theme park. And the group that believed in the Faceless Power might've settled beneath the sea and become the Republic."

"...Huh?" This surprised Lily.

"But if we assume that's the case, a lot of things make sense," Korone nodded. Yoshie nodded as well, and continued.

"That's where you get the two Faceless Powers that Akuto and Marine were talking about. Marine and Nonimora were using the Faceless Power sealed within the Swallow's Cowry Shell. And then there's the power that the people of the Republic are using, which can destroy the world."

"That's the thing. How are they different?"

Korone must've been intrigued by the existence of something that wasn't in her databanks, because for once, she just asked a straight-up question.

"My guess... is that the Faceless Power sealed within the Swallow's Cowry shell comes from the outer universe."

"The outer universe?" Lily asked, surprised again.

"I don't have any proof of this yet, but yes. And then the power that's granting the wishes of the Republic's people might be our collective unconsciousness, don't you think?"

“Then the reason Akuto and Marine are fighting…” Korone whispered.

Yoshie shook her head sadly.

“That’s right. They’ve reached the same conclusion that we have. Mankind’s collective unconsciousness has created a new power beyond the reach of mana, and is using it to summon an asteroid.”

“Then the asteroid was summoned by the people?”

“That’s right. But even if I’m wrong… we don’t know if it’s possible to destroy the asteroid.” Yoshie’s voice betrayed a sense of resignation.



“But...” Keena spoke up, “But if everybody wishes to get rid of the asteroid... that could do it, right?” She had her hands together, as if in prayer.

Yoshie nodded, seeming to have already thought of this.

“Of course... Of course that’s what I want to happen. But how many people would be able to forgive the people of the republic? And Akuto knows exactly what everyone in the empire is thinking.”

There was a long pause. It was Lily’s calm voice that broke the silence.

“Got it. So I need to go take a look at the Swallow’s Cowry Shell in the Marlay village, right? Send me the data.”

“Huh?” Yoshie said, shocked.

“I’m gonna go look into the Marlay village. It’s in that big uh... tower, thing, right? The sealing capsule and the ship that travels to the stars.” Lily sounded so confident that Yoshie answered without really thinking about it.

“T-That’s right. That’s the Swallow’s Cowry Shell. That leaves the Robe of the Fire Rat and Dragon’s Neck Jewel, right?”

“Both of those depend on the Demon King, right?”

“Y-Yeah... The Robe of the Fire Rat supposedly opens the door to the afterlife. That, we have. It may be some kind of powerful necromancy... Or maybe a dimensional transfer device. And the other one is Peterhausen. A powerful weapon for the Demon King, a device, and a guidepost... Something like that, essentially.” Yoshie had answered, but then she felt compelled to ask Lily a question.

“Tell me, what do you intend to do with this information?”

“Eh, I’m just the kind of person who can’t simply sit back and do nothing,” Lily said, blushing a little.

“But...”

“There’s barely any mysteries left... I think, anyway. But there’s a chance that if we learn the connection between our world and the Faceless Power, we might find a way to stop the asteroid,” Lily continued, assuming that Yoshie wasn’t going to finish her comment.

“But well, basically, I feel a real need to kick some ass.”

○

When she finished her call, Lily turned to the rest of the student council.

"You guys don't like this whole 'We might die' thing at all, do you?"

The three of them seemed caught off-guard by her statement.

"I am, yes."

"Ayup, gya"

"Gugah."

"Yeah, of course you don't like it..." Lily looked up at the ceiling above the yacht's control panel.

"But why are you asking us this? I-I mean, I understand the asteroid's coming and all..."

"T-That's right, gya. It's bad luck to even talk about it, gya. You're the one who said there's a chance it could all work out."

"Well, um... I'm just thinking that after we're done here, we may end up someplace different than we've been up until now," Lily said, her voice serious for once.

"Aww, president. Don't get so serious like that." Kanna tried to laugh off her concerns. When Lily turned to her with a serious expression, her laughter froze. But then Lily started to laugh as well.

"Ahahahaha..."

"Hah...hahah..." An awkward smile appeared on Michie's face.

"Gugahgugahgugah..." Is it okay to laugh? Arnoul seemed to say, and only then did Kanna start to laugh herself.

"Eh, well... You know. What I'm trying to say is that when we die, we die together." Lily's laugh began to sound embarrassed.

"A-Aww, President..."

"Yeah, gya. We've already been through so much together."

"Gugah."

The three of them laughed awkwardly, feeling embarrassed. The yacht's auto-pilot emitted a warning sound. It was beginning its descent.

"We're here, huh...?" Lily said, and then motioned to the trio. They'd arrived at the clearing where the Marlay village was located.

"But... something's not right, gya," Kanna said as she looked at the village on the monitor.

"There's... nobody here, huh?" Michie nodded.

"It doesn't seem like there's any danger, but..." Lily glanced at the monitor as she opened the hatch.

“It’s just too quiet.”

Lily looked around. The Marlay village was surrounded by a verdant forest. The houses were wood, and the village seemed to be very poor. But the lack of people bothered them more than anything. Even if they were inside, the populace still should’ve stuck their head out to peek at the approaching yacht.

“There should be a decent number of people here...” Lily said, motioning for the trio to stay sharp.

Kanna dropped low and listened carefully. Her nose and ears were better than the others.

“That way, gya.”

She was pointing to the area past the opposite side of the village.

“What’s over there?”

“I hear a dog... and Nonimora. They’re fighting.”

“A dog...? The One?” Michie asked, and they all started to run. They could see the tower up ahead of them.

“If that’s the tower, then...” Lily whispered.

“Is The One still after something here?” Kanna asked, and the rest of the group’s eyes began to shine.

“Does that mean there’s something here he hasn’t accomplished yet?”

“Then... We still have a chance!” Lily grinned.

The trio and Lily ran to the yard in front of the lab that formed the tower’s base. The One and Nonimora were there, fighting.

“So he was after the village!”

Nonimora was standing in front of the lab, swinging around a spear. The One was trying to get closer and closer to Nonimora. Then The One and Nonimora saw Lily’s group approaching.

“More threats?” Nonimora shot a harsh glance at Lily. She’d never met the student council president. Lily noticed her gaze, and clapped her glove-clad hands together.

“Nope. We’re here to help.”

The trio followed up behind her.

“We’re here too!”

“Gya.”

“Gugah.”

The trio were ready to fight. Kanna had already transformed into her beast mode, and Michie and Arnoul had fanned out beside her.

“Hmph. I’m surrounded, huh?”

The One looked around him. The Student Council were combat veterans, and there was nowhere for him to run.

“Now... be a good doggy and surrender.” Lily raised her fists.

“With this body and this combat ability, I never had a chance...” The One said, but he continued to smirk. “But there is one thing that’s in my favor... I think it’ll work out.”

“What’s in your favor? You’re staring down an ass-beating.” Lily smirked back.

“You’ll know at some point.”

He said, but before the words left his mouth Lily had already begun her attack.

“You think so, huh?!”

There was the sound of something tearing through the wind. Lily’s punch, however, was even faster than that.

“Tch...!”

The One dodged with his doggy speed. But Lily just laughed.

“Hah!” she shouted, and her formerly-straight arm immediately turned 90 degrees.

“What...?!” The arm had changed its direction to right where The One was going to land.

“Gwah!”

The punch landed hard on The One’s stomach, sending him flying.

“That attack is my specialty.” Lily bared her teeth. The One adjusted his position in mid-air, landing on all fours and looking at Lily in surprise.

“There’s not supposed to be any mana here...”

“I came on a yacht. And I brought a generator and a mana disperser.”

Lily launched another attack. With both of those, it was possible to use magic. The area was already densely filled with mana. But the same was true of the enemy.

“But then I can fight equally well!”

The One put up a mana shield to block Lily’s attacks. There was a dull thudding sound as they slammed into the glowing energy. But Lily was still relaxed and confident.

“Equal? We ain’t equal at all.” Lily began to smash her fists into the shield again.

“Uwah!” The One gasped in surprise. Both he and the shield

had been knocked backward.

"Hey, not bad!" Nonimora said happily.

"Don't mess with a veteran brawler," Lily said, proudly putting her hand up to her hat.

"Now... There's lots I want to ask you." Lily cracked her knuckles as she walked toward The One.

The One must've been hurt, because his doggy snout was panting.

"Hmph... You think you've won, huh?" The One said, sarcastically, but Lily ignored him.

"I sure have. A dog's no match for... me!"

With the last word she threw another punch. This time, the incredible force of it blew through The One's shield in an instant. Her anger had clearly made her attack more powerful.

"Uwaahh...!"

Now The One was scared. Lily's fist smashed into him right above the eyes. His howls turned into raw screams.

"Gyaaah!"

Next, she grabbed him by the head and smashed his jaw hard into the ground. He hit it so hard he went flying back up into the air. Then, she grabbed him with her left hand. She snatched him by the throat and began to squeeze hard.

"Gwoah..."

The One began to moan as he was suspended helplessly in the air.

"Hah... I think tonight we'll be having dog stew for dinner," Lily laughed.

"Oooh! The President's stronger than usual today!"

"I think it's 'cause she's pretty mad!" Kanna and Michie were excited.

"Calm down, guys. Calm down. I'm always this strong." She grinned, and then squeezed The One's throat tighter.

"Guh... geh...." The One could barely breathe.

"Alright, time to start talking. First, who the hell are you?" Lily asked.

"Hmm? What are you going to do? You're not going to kill him?" Nonimora asked as she walked over.

"Things are complicated, you see. There are some questions I have for him," Lily explained. Then she put her right hand up against her left, and began to shake.

“D-Damn it...” The One was moaning in pain, but in his doggy body, he couldn’t fight back. Eventually, he began to talk, though resentment was clear in his tone.

“Fine... What is it you want to know?”

“Piss me off and I’ll snap your throat, puppy-boy. I asked who the fuck you were. Answer me.” Lily squeezed tighter.

“Aaagh... I suppose I’m what you’d call an alien.”

“An alien?” Lily had been expecting this answer, a little, but it was still a bit of a surprise. The others must have felt the same way, because their eyes had all gone wide at the response.”

“So that’s what’s going on...”

The One was staring at her defiantly now, but she kept asking questions.

“So let me ask this. Does space exist beyond the solar system?”

“It can’t be observed. That’s right. But... beyond it, lies another universe.”

The One now must have felt like he was controlling the conversation, because his tone had changed to that of a teacher.

“So this world itself ends at the solar system,” Lily said.

“Correct. That’s as far as the world goes. The other worlds are the same.”

“Which means that you broke through that wall... and came to our world that way.”

“Yes. But only my mind came. What you call the Faceless Power is the collective mind of us aliens.”

“Wait... Aren’t there two kinds of Faceless Power?” Lily asked.

“Correct. Our minds... The minds of we aliens... are held within this tower.” The One pointed his front paws, as best he could anyway, in the direction of the tower.

“That the power that Marine and I are using, right?” Nonimora said.

“Correct. But the Jeweled Branch, which was created to control it, can also unleash it.”

Lily began to get a bad feeling when she heard these words.

“So the other Faceless Power... the one the people of the Republic are using... it’s the Faceless Power of mankind, isn’t it?” She shuddered as she spoke.

The Faceless Power of mankind. It was impossible to say what might result from using the psyche of an entire race as energy when that race was still alive, but it probably wasn’t something good.

“That’s right. Once, mankind sealed it, saying it was impossible to control. But now, by coincidence, it has revived.” The One chuckled to himself as he spoke, as if telling a funny story.

“Impossible to control…”

“Yes. I am the last survivor of my race. My race was destroyed, and became a Faceless Power. And we were stuffed inside your capsule… The Swallow’s Cowry Shell. I am a being of pure mind that became separated from it.”

Though his tone suggested humor, what he was saying was terrifying.

“You were destroyed… And then became the Faceless Power? Why were you destroyed?”

“Because we tried to use the Faceless Power in our own world.”

“But then… that means…”

“Correct. The Faceless Power has, at least in theory, no will of its own. But for some reason, it acts to destroy a race. Perhaps this is only because every race hates itself, and desires its own destruction.”

“Does that mean…” Lily felt something cold run down her spine.

The One laughed, as if to say “yes.”

“Hahaha!~ That’s right! It’s going to work to destroy humanity. That’s what it’s doing right now! The Faceless Power is what summoned that asteroid!”

The student council, as well as Nonimora, fell silent.

“But you don’t get anything out of destroying another race! Or do you just want to see destruction?” Lily alone spoke.

The One snorted.

“Haha! Not at all. I’m not Kei Sakura. The Faceless Power is infinitely strong inside a world. But when it’s destroyed that world’s race, it’s ejected from the world. It becomes a vapor, you might say.”

“So if humanity is destroyed…”

“Correct. The Faceless Power will vaporize. And then I will be liberated from this… I’ll finally be at peace, you could say. Of course you realize I don’t like the fact that the minds of my race are being used as a mere power source!”

The One was laughing as if this were the funniest thing in the world. Lily could feel the pit of her stomach turning cold. If this was true, a most terrible fate awaited them. Humanity would be

destroyed, become a collective consciousness and then wander the universe, before finally destroying the consciousness of another race.

“What the hell? I refuse to believe that. It’s like a curse...!” Lily howled, not to The One, or to any one in particular. But The One just laughed.

“Hah! That’s right! The whole universe is made of curses! Now that you know this, you can die! Nobody can stop it now!” The One laughed victoriously.

Lily tightened her grip on his throat..

“Don’t you dare laugh...!”

“Gah...” The One’s face changed colors. Even though he was a dog, you could still tell that his face was turning an unhealthy shade of purple and red. You could see blood vessels bulging beneath Lily’s hands as she strangled him.

“If you’re just a mind, you won’t mind dying, will you?”

“Gwahahaha... That’s right... Killing me won’t cause... any problems... for me.” There was a snapping sound as The One’s neck broke, and the dog stopped talking.

“P-President, there may still have been things we could’ve asked him...” Michie said hesitantly, but Lily just glared.

“We’ve learned enough. The origins of mana. The belief of the gods in the Law of Identity. What the imperial family protected all these years. It’s all connected. All that’s left is to figure out what to do with that asteroid.” Lily pointed to the sky, where there was still nothing that could be seen.

”Don’t tell me... we’re all gonna die?” Michie asked uneasily.

○

“I’m not sure it’s ethical, but... we should evacuate. Probably,” Yoshie said calmly, when Lily explained the situation. She was always calm, but it was impressive that she’d kept her cool even in a serious situation like this.

“Evacuate...? To where, exactly?” Yuko asked in a timid voice. She’d gone dead pale.

Everyone else in the command room was panicking. The war situation was getting worse. Marine had sworn to stop the Republic, but their attack wasn’t slowing at all. No, their physical weapons had stopped. But the colorless flames created by the Faceless Power

will still raining down on the empire. It was a sign of just how much the Republic people hated the Empire.

"Well, the surface is pretty much done for." Yoshie said, displaying a simulation of what would happen if the asteroid hit. It showed a huge asteroid smashing through the atmosphere, creating an explosion that sent pieces of the Earth's crust flying up into the air. The shockwave traveled across the entire Earth, before bursting outward like a volcanic eruption on the other side. It was clear that anything on the Earth's surface, or several kilometers above it, was done for. And there were barely any people living more than 3 kilometers above the Earth's surface.

"We don't have the supplies needed to take anyone to space..." Korone said.

The moon base had been destroyed. The space stations had mostly shut down.

"Hear me out. I'm trying to stay as rational about this as possible. So basically... it would take a long time to explain, but the only person who would really survive would be Keena Soga," Yoshie said.

"Huh?" Yuko gasped, before falling silent.

Keena leaned toward Yoshie, looking shocked.

"W-Wait... I can't... What do you mean?"

But Yoshie was calm.

"I told you it would take a long time to explain. First, let's say that hypothesis I came up with was right. Um... the one about this world being a fiction someone created. If that's the case, the key is the Law of Identity. And by making sure that the Law of Identity, and the Empress, who can communicate with her and use all these different items survives... we can stop humanity from completely becoming the Faceless Power."

"But how do we do that? She can't go alone..." Korone began, but Yoshida cut her off.

"The Swallow's Cowry Shell is a spaceship and preservation capsule. Her highness can go inside it, enter cold sleep, and then orbit what's left of the Earth."

"What...?" Keena couldn't believe what she was hearing. The followers of Suhara in the command room started to murmur among themselves.

"It'll buy us about a thousand years, I think," Yoshie said.

"A thousand years? So what, everybody else is just going to

die?" Yuko protested. But Yoshie just nodded calmly.

"I'm telling you that you can't think of death that way. If my hypothesis is right, there's a world after death, and you can use the Robe of the Fire Rat to go in and out of it."

"Huh? Then..." The look on Keena's face said that she'd figured something out.

"That's right. Only the Demon King can enter and leave it," Yoshie said. "So this is the plan: We take Keena, the Demon King, and then the Jeweled Branch, the Robe of the Fire Rat, and the Dragon's Neck Jewel up to the old space station. Then she goes into cold sleep, and after the asteroid hits, the Demon King enters the afterlife."

"What about the rest of us?" Yuko asked.

"All of us, including me, die. Every. Single. One. Of. Us." Yoshie grinned.

"W-Wait, that's..."

"Not something you're comfortable with. Of course. But we don't have a choice," Yoshie said.

Everyone fell silent. It was Keena who broke the silence.

"Um, but what does Ackie do after he goes to the afterlife?"

"I don't know..."

"Huh?"

"I don't know. Maybe he can take everyone with him and come home. Maybe he can't do anything. Maybe he can come and go, but everyone else has to stay there." Yoshie shook her head.

"B-But that's so irresponsible..." Yuko said

"I mean, from an emotional standpoint, I'm against it too... But it's the only way," Yoshie said with a shrug.

○

Throw a punch. Get hit with a punch. Recover. How many times had both of them repeated that process?

Both Akuto and Marine were covered in wounds they hadn't had time to heal, and were inflicting yet more wounds on each other's bodies. Each strike from one of them was enough to easily shatter rock, but the two of them had each taken dozens of hits.

"What good is your pride if you can't stop the war?"

"It's better than refusing to stop the war because you're mad about a girl!"

“You won’t gain anything from winning this fight!”

“That’s better than just looking for something to take your anger out on!”

Still, the speed at which the two of them were throwing their punches had begun to decrease. They would throw a punch, then rest for a moment, taking huge panting breaths.

“You’re almost out of stamina... aren’t you?”

“What about you? You look like you can barely stand. I guess you should’ve trained harder, huh?”

Akuto and Marine spat insults at each other, and then both punched each other in the stomach.

“Still... it’s so strange that we’d be fighting each other when we might all be about to die,” Marine said.

“People once said that if a threat ever came from outer space, humanity would band together to fight it,” Akuto said with a sarcastic smile.

“I guess that was wrong, then.”

“There was also a story about a sage... or a man who ruled his country like a dictator... who brought the world together.”

“That was a lie too.”

“It’s a shame... but I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Agreed. By the way, you’re about at your limit, aren’t you?” Marine said, breathing heavily.

“I’ve still got a lot of strength,” Akuto said, between panting breaths.

“Liar.”

“...Alright, let’s finish this. Let’s see which is stronger: stubborn pride for one’s country, or misplaced anger over a girl’s death,” Akuto said, and Marine smiled with bloody lips.

“Yeah.”

The two of them raised their fists. The air around them began to roar. Two whirlwinds sprung up, collided, and became tornadoes. At the center, the two of their fists had collided. Sprays of blood and bits of shattered bone and flesh were caught up in the whirlwind. It lasted for several minutes.

Suddenly, the tornadoes stopped, and the wind calmed.

They were both a mess. Both Akuto and Marine’s fists were no longer recognizable. They were pounding raw lumps of meat into each other’s faces. Akuto’s knees buckled and he staggered. But before he could, Marine collapsed backward, sending up a cloud of

dust as he landed.

Marine looked up at the sky in a daze.

“So the girl... won out over the country, huh?” he whispered.

“That’s the natural order of things... probably.” Akuto pulled his legs out of the ground, walked over to the Jeweled Branch, and took it.

“What will you do now?” Marine asked.

“It may be a waste of time.. . But I’m still gonna see if I can’t stop that asteroid.”

○

But things were going in the exact opposite of the direction Akuto wanted. Brave had gone on to try and persuade Marine’s little sister on the front lines to stop the war. He’d only succeeded when the Republic forces realized the asteroid was falling.

“...Alright. We’ll pull back our forces.” Marine’s sister, the princess, said.

There was no joy on Brave’s side. This had only happened after he’d shown the princess the data Yoshie had sent, and after she’d seen Marine’s defeat. There was no joy to be had on anyone’s part.

“It’s almost too late... as much as I’d rather not say it,” Brave said to the princess.

The two of them were facing across from one another on her ship. She’d invited Brave here to negotiate. But the princess just gave him a peaceful smile.

“That’s just how politics works.”

“As long as the Empire and Republic can work together to stop the asteroid...” Brave said, but the princess cut him off.

“We will return to the bottom of the sea. There’s some small probability that we’ll survive that way.”

“What? But you can’t...”

“With our technology, there is almost no chance of stopping the asteroid. So we’re going to choose the path that grants us a chance at survival. The sea trench is several thousand meters deep. There must be some places that will survive the impact.

“But...” Brave tried to insist, but the princess’s expression did not change.

“That’s just how politics works,” she said. “We’re also willing to accept you as an honorary citizen, if you like.”

Brave shook his head.

“I’ll pass. I think I’d better go, then...” Brave left, feeling filled with despair.

5 - Farewell, Humanity

Of course, it took a while for both Akuto and Brave to agree to Yoshie's plan.

"We may still be able to stop the asteroid."

"I agree with the boss."

The two of them spoke in tandem.

"But you know... We know that the Jeweled Branch had no effect on it," Yoshie said coldly.

Keena had tried waving around the branch like a magic wand, chanting nonsense spells. But while she could do her ordinary magic with it, nothing special was happening.

"I know that. But..."

"I know what you're going to say. Giving up doesn't suit your personality. But there's no physical way to do anything about that asteroid."

"Is the Faceless Power that strong?"

"Yup. It's the will of an entire species. In order to match it, you'd need to have all of humanity be one person."

"Then if we can bring humanity's will together...!" Hiroshi's eyes were shining, like he thought he'd just had a great idea.

Yoshie shook her head, though.

"You couldn't do that with the Republic. And non-mana civilizations don't even have the ability to turn their will into power," she said. "The Faceless Power is a terrifying curse."

"Then there's really nothing we can do?"

"Probably not. But you know, I think anybody except Akuto's free to try anything they like." She sighed.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Akuto's going to need to go to the afterlife for us. So we can't have him dying. Of course, the Empress is going into cold sleep, so we can't have her dying before or after either. And we need Brave to carry the capsule up to orbit. But if anybody else dies, either before or after, it's not a problem.

"That sounds... really ridiculous, somehow," Akuto said, a little

confused.

"Everybody else just has to be ready to die, after all. Anyway, we're doing this tomorrow. The reason why it's tomorrow is that the asteroid lands tomorrow night. Until then... anybody's free to do whatever they like. Even commit suicide," Yoshie said, indulging in a moment of dark humor.

○

"I still refuse to accept this," Lily sighed. The table in the student council room was laden with snacks. The trio were sitting around it, gobbling them down.

"Yeah... It's pretty pathetic that our last meal is convience store junk food," Mochie said.

Lily frowned at her.

"That's not what I meant. I meant the fact that there's no way to fight back."

"But all the stores are closed, and we can't get anything that's appropriate for a last meal, gya." Kanna complained too.

"Shut up. You only get a good last meal if you're on death row. What would you even want to eat, anyway?" Lily asked. Both Michie and Kanna thought for a moment before answering.

"Rice and miso soup."

"Rare steak. With potatoes."

Lily snorted.

"Yeah, I thought it'd be something like that. Not really any different than junk food, is it? You never drank soda or ate junk food because you were worried about your weight. So you'll never get another chance to eat this much. Eat up."

"You're right, aren't you gyah?"

"Melon bread's got lots of calories, after all..."

The two of them went back to wolfing down the junk food.

"Gugah."

Arnoul, however, hadn't eaten a thing.

"Sure, you don't eat, do you... Huh? Headmaster?" Lily shouted in surprise.

The headmaster's face was poking out from behind Arnoul.

"Eh, I've got nothing to do, so I came to get some junk food too." He reached for the potato chips.

"You didn't have any last minute stuff to do?" Lily asked,

stunned.

"When you're as old as me, the temples stop giving you work. I've been really bored." He sighed dejectedly. The other teachers had all been summoned by the various temples to help quell the panic that was taking place.

"Don't you have any family to spend your last hours with?"

"Well, when you live as many centuries as I do, you don't, really..." he laughed. His laugh was a dry rattle.

"I'm sure young maidens like you would prefer a younger man to spend the end of your lives with, though."

"Nah..." Lily chuckled, but Kanna seemed to take him seriously.

"That's right! The problem is we don't have any boys here!"

"Gugah."

Arnoul tried to quiet her down, but then Michie joined in, too.

"That's right! I spent my whole youth without a boyfriend!"

"Gya-gya!"

"Calm down. There just weren't that many guys who were good enough for us, that's all," Lily said, tossing a piece of chocolate into her mouth.

"Well, you're lucky. Anybody who hit on you, you just hit them in the face."

"That's right. Nobody ever tried to date us at all!"

The two of them sighed sadly..

"Be quiet. The world could end at any time, so if you want to date somebody, tell them," Lily said sarcastically.

"Hmph. I should've attacked the first good man I saw."

"That'd make you just a wolf woman..."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who's basically a vampire girl. Anyway, is there anything you regret not being able to do, President?" Kanna suddenly asked.

"Sure. I told you in front of the tower that I might die, but that I was ready for it, right?"

"Yeah, gya."

"What did that mean?"

"I... think I expected to die fighting. I wanted to go out in a blaze of glory... But instead I'm just sitting here eating junk food." Lily laughed in self-derision.

"That's part of being young... I understand how you feel, but not everybody gets to be a hero. When something's not going to happen, it's best to just give up on it," the Headmaster lamented

quietly.

"I wanted to do everything with a bang."

"That's how the world ends. It just quietly fades away. Many civilizations in the past died the same way, I'm told. But perhaps, this may not be the end. That man may still yet have something in store for us..."

"Akuto Sai, you mean?" Lily asked.

○

Meanwhile, someone else was saying a last goodbye to his girlfriend. Hiroshi and Yuko were walking along the beach.

"Sorry I'm not more cheerful..." Yuko apologized.

Hiroshi shook his head.

"It's fine! It's not your fault! No place is open in town, and it felt like we'd just be all gloomy if we stayed there..."

"Yeah... But you know, it feels weird. The world's going to be destroyed soon. And if it isn't, then everybody is still going to die..." Yuko said, staring out at the sea.

"I-It's fine. They say even if you die, you don't really die... That there's life after death. S-So you know, even if you die, you'll be okay..." Hiroshi said, but there was no strength behind his words.

"I know. Yoshie told me. But do you believe that? I mean, I don't really know, but in the end, I guess we might just be some characters some author invented?"

Yuko leaned up against Hiroshi, unable to hide her fear. Hiroshi felt the weight of her body, and realized he didn't really believe what Yoshie had said, either.



“It’s weird... What does it really mean, that this world might be fictional?”

“Yeah... I mean, if you die, you die, right? I don’t want that...”

“Yeah..”

All Hiroshi could do was nod.

“And you’re taking Keena... her highness... up to space, right? If you do, I’ll never see you again.”

“I have to do it anyway. It’s important. If it works, I may be able to bring everyone back to life...” Hiroshi said, stumbling over his words. But even as he spoke, he still couldn’t bring himself to believe it.

“It can’t be true! I mean, even right now I’m thinking my own thoughts... I’m me!” Yuko buried her face in Hiroshi’s chest and began sobbing.

“It’ll be fine... Brave is... I mean... I am... allowed to do whatever I want whenever the mission’s done. So I... I’m going to stop the asteroid myself. I can still do things in space. So I know I can...” Hiroshi said, and then Yuko looked up at him.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. I’ll protect you. You, and humanity.”

“Wow... You really are a hero.”

“Don’t worry... I’ll protect you... I’ll protect you...”

Hiroshi kept repeating himself. He wasn’t sure if he was lying or telling the truth, or just trying to calm Yuko down. He didn’t know if she believed him. He didn’t know anything at all. But he didn’t want his words to end up as a lie. That, at least, he knew.

And then suddenly, the reality of his death came crashing down on him. He’d been in many situations in the past where death was a possibility. But this time, it felt totally different.

“I’ll... protect you...” He repeated to himself, and then gave Yuko a kiss.

○

“I got authorization for our operation. Officially, we’re sending Keena Soga into space.” Yoshie said as she entered a meeting room inside the Marlay village. There was nobody there but Akuto. He had the Robe of the Fire Rat in front of him, and was reading the

manual on how to use it.

"Officially?" Akuto asked, looking up from the manual.

"Nobody knows if the Robe of the Fire Rat actually works. Honestly, I don't either."

"It does," Akuto said, cutting her off.

"Huh?"

"It works. Fujiko gave up her life to get it for me."

Without Fujiko, The One would probably have destroyed it.

"You're right. If The One wanted it broken, that means it probably does something."

"That's another way of looking at it," Akuto said, and then stared again at the small parabolic antenna.

"Whether it works or not, we won't know what it does until we try to use it," Yoshie said with a sigh.

"The afterlife, huh?" Akuto murmured.

"If it exists, what do you think it's like?"

"It's hard to say... I don't know if I entirely believe it myself. If this world is fictional.. Like some dream of the Law of Identity, then there should be an afterlife... But I still wonder, what happens if I'm wrong?"

Yoshie laughed, sounding a little tired.

"If even you feel that way... then I can understand why everybody else is worried."

"You're giving me too much credit... but it makes me happy that you feel that way."

Yoshie's eyes took on a distant look.

"They say that people who did neither good nor evil don't have the right to even go to hell. Which am I, do you think? I know I haven't done anything good... So what end do you think the Law of Identity has prepared for me?"

"I'm not sure. But to me, you don't seem like a girl who never did anything." Akuto smiled.

"And even if the Law of Identity did make this world, we all have minds of our own. With a strong enough will, maybe we can affect the world."

"A strong will, huh? Even if we're fictional characters?"

"That's right. We'll be able to accomplish something big. If we can't even believe that, I don't think we deserve to be here."

"A strong will that can accomplish something..."

Yoshie said to herself, and then nodded, as if convinced of

something. And then she gave Akuto a mischievous grin, and moved her face close to his.

“Hey, if that’s true, I’d like to try out my own will on something.”

“Your own will?”

“I want to see if a character’s will can change the flow of a story,” she said, pursing her lips and closing her eyes.

“W-Wait a second...” Akuto said, confused.

“If Keena’s will is mixed in with the Law of Identity, then she wouldn’t want to let me kiss you, right? So I’m testing to see if this works,” Yoshie said, and leaned in closer.

“Um... uh...”

“Stop being stubborn. Come on!” she yelled at him.

Akuto gave in and drew his face closer to hers for a kiss. However, it was on the cheek.

“Hmph!” Yoshie pouted.

“Damn... I guess that’s as much as my will can do.”

She laughed.

○

The next day, the others arrived in the Marlay village by teleportation via Lily’s yacht. They went into the tower lab, where the Marlay elder was examining the Swallow’s Cowry Shell.

“I was right, only one person can fit in this.” Nonimora sighed. The only ones present were the Marlay elder, Nonimora, Akuto, Hiroshi, and Yoshie.

“She’ll just have to accept it. This is fate,” Yoshie said.

The mission was a top secret one. The public hadn’t been informed that Keena was coming here.

“I don’t really like this. It feels like we’re lying to people,” Hiroshi said, looking at the mana screen.

The news was showing shots of panicked citizens, as well as the empire gathering its surviving forces to destroy the asteroid. The government was insisting that it could destroy the asteroid once it entered the atmosphere. So the plan’s to take this capsule up to orbit, and then take a break?”

“That’s right. Then she can watch the end of the world... or I guess she doesn’t have to. After that, she goes into cold sleep, and then Akuto goes into the afterlife.”

“And nobody knows what happens then.”

“Correct.” Yoshie nodded.

“I’m not scared to die!” Nonimora shouted to no one in particular, jumping up and down. “In the Marlay tribe, heroes surpass even death.”

“That’s good to know. I hope it’s evidence of something, actually. Anyway, it’s about time...” Yoshie glanced at her watch.

The door to the lab opened. Keena came in, wearing a white dress. It probably wasn’t intended as a burial dress, but supposedly it was the fanciest dress the palace had. Except for the lack of a train, it looked like a bridal dress. Both the old knight who was her servitor and Korone were behind her. But when she entered the room, the old knight silently walked away.

“She’s pretty, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Hiroshi and Akuto nodded to one another. Keena hated frilly clothes like this, so the fact that she was wearing this was a sign of how serious she was. Akuto looked at her face, and saw that she was wearing a thin layer of makeup.

“Guys...” she said, but then fell silent. But no one seemed bothered by the fact that she didn’t say another word. Instead, they all motioned her into the capsule.

Keena silently climbed inside. Just before the door closed, she finally spoke up.

“This isn’t the end, everybody! It isn’t goodbye!”

She was trying to make herself sound as confident as she could.

“We know.” Yoshie and Nonimora smiled.

The capsule closed tightly, with no time for further words. Hiroshi equipped his Brave suit, put Korone, who was carrying the Robe of the Fire Rat, on his back, and then turned to Akuto. Akuto lifted the capsule and flew upward through the tower.

Nonimora and Yoshie waved as they departed. Instead of waving back, Akuto nodded at them. He and Brave flew up high into the sky, carrying the capsule with them.

When they broke through the atmosphere, Akuto deployed a mana field around himself, while Brave used his gravity control to allow them to move. Once they arrived at the now-abandoned space station, they opened the airlock and placed the Swallow’s Cowry Shell inside.

The station was an experimental one, with only a small space

for the crew, but there was enough room for the four of them to talk. Out one window they could see the Earth, and out another, the distant sight of the advancing asteroid. They opened the capsule after making sure there was oxygen for Keena to breathe.

"I feel kinda... guilty... that we're the only ones surviving," Keena said.

"It's still the best option we have. Please just accept it," Korone replied, taking out a futon from her bag for herself to sleep in. The inside of her pocket was a VPS. Since it depended on power from Earth to work, it wouldn't be useful for much longer. This futon would probably be the last tool that Korone pulled from it.

"Why a futon?" Akuto asked.

"When the Empress awakes once more, I need to be by her side... This futon is made from special fibers. If I get inside and shut down, I'll stay fresh for around another thousand years."

"I see... wait, fresh?" Akuto asked.

"Fresh for a thousand years... My own idea of a joke, I guess."

As they spoke, the asteroid was getting larger and larger in the far window.

"It's almost time, isn't it?" Hiroshi asked. Korone poked his side with her elbow. Hiroshi looked back at her, confused. She got into her futon before continuing.

"I'm going to sleep. I'll see you all in the next life."

Hiroshi finally understood.

"Oh, um... I've gotta go, boss. I've got something I've gotta do."

"Something you have to do?"

"Yes. I'm gonna stop that asteroid, or at least try to. If I'm gonna die anyway, it's better that I go out with a bang, huh?"

And that was all he said, before heading out the airlock. There was a small "Fwoosh" sound as the air escaped, and then silence. Akuto thought to himself that they could've said a longer goodbye, but he satisfied himself by thinking that Hiroshi truly believed in this world.

"I guess I should get to work, too..." he said, but Keena stopped him.

"Hey, Ackie."

"What is it?" He turned around. Keena was right next to him, staring at the ground.

"You don't have to be that worried..." he said, but then suddenly Keena looked up at him. Her face was bright red. She

didn't look like she was depressed, or sad.

"W-What is it?"

"W-Well..." Keena said, and then started to fidget. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but they weren't coming out.

"A-Are you okay?" He asked again. And then she started to talk.

"I know this might not be the end... but I'm going to sleep for a long time, right?"

"I think so. You might wake up right away though... maybe." Akuto nodded.

"Do you think I'll forget what happened when I was asleep?"

"I'm sure you will. Even if you wake up years later, it'll be like you slept a single night."

"Then it'll be okay, right? You'll come to wake me up, right?" Keena said, staring into his eyes.

"I'm sure I will." Akuto answered gently, trying to make her feel better.

"Yeah... Okay, then I can sleep without having to worry. But will you promise me?" Keena asked.

Akuto's eyes betrayed his hesitation.

"I already... I already promised you, just now. It'll be fine. I'll come back. I don't know for sure where I'm going, but..."

"No. Promise me. Now..." Keena began to fidget again.

"What?"

"Now... let's get married now."

"M-Married...?" Akuto was caught off guard.

"Y-Yeah. I mean, it's not the last time, but it might be the last time. And I... I kind of want a promise."

Keena was rambling, a forced smile on her face.

"Um... uh... well..."

"Is that... a no?" Keena's expression clouded.

"I-It's not a no, but..."

"T-Then let's do it! I'm wearing a white dress right now... And I mean, you kissed Nonimora too..."

She started to flail her hands as she spoke.

"A-Are you serious?" Akuto said, and then he grabbed Keena's flailing hands and lightly held them.

"Y-Yeah... I'm serious," she said, and then looked down at the ground.

"If you're serious then... yes."

"Really?!" Keena looked up at him with bright eyes.

“Yeah... I’m serious, but um... what do I do?”

Keena suddenly looked just as confused as him.

“Y-Yeah. What do you do, actually?”

“Well, most of our friends are too young to get married... So I’ve never even been to a wedding.”

“Y-You put a ring on me, right?”

“B-But I don’t have a ring...” Akuto said, confused.

“Then, um... how about this?” She jumped into his arms.

“Huh...?”

Akuto staggered under her weight for a moment, and then looked down to see that she was looking into his eyes with trembling lips.

“Ackie...” she said, and then fell completely silent. Her eyes were slowly closing. Akuto knew what she meant. He brought her close and softly moved his face to hers, before quietly giving her a kiss.



○

The door to the Swallow's Cowry Shell closed. On the other side of the window Keena was waving at him. Akuto waved back. He followed the instruction manual and flipped the switch. Gas poured out and filled the capsule. The window clouded up and Keena gradually faded from view. She breathed in the gas and went to sleep immediately, but Akuto kept waving as long as he could see her face. Before long, a notice appeared on the console saying that the cold sleep process was complete. He glanced at it, and then backed away.

"Now, on to the next step," he said to himself, and then went over to the Robe of the Fire Rat, which had been placed in the corner. All he had to do was stand in front of the antenna portion and flip the switch.

"Akuto."

Suddenly, he heard a voice.

"Huh?"

He turned around and saw Korone sitting up in her futon.

"You seemed to be having a lot of fun a moment ago."

"H-Hey, you don't have to put it like that. I thought you were asleep! That's not very nice," he said, turning red.

"I'm sorry. I simply wanted to be a witness to humanity's end."

"Well... maybe it would be good if there was somebody left who could talk about it."

He was kind of annoyed, but when he thought about it, he realized that it might not be such a bad idea.

"Alright, take care of the rest here."

"Of course."

She nodded, but then spoke as if she'd remembered something.

"Um... Do I not get a kiss?"

"...Are you serious?"

"No."

"I figured," he laughed. He stood alone in front of the Robe of the Fire rat, and flipped the switch. Suddenly, he vanished.

○

Korone looked out the window. No one was left. If she shut down her motors, there would be no sound here at all. Once she shut down, she would last a thousand years or until someone woke her up. If, when that happened, mana-based civilization still existed, she could be completely rebuilt. Failing that, her data could be read as long as there was electricity. She made one final attempt to access to the gods. They had nothing particularly important to say.

"We simply failed in our mission. Everything will disappear."

Those were the gods' words. No matter what she asked, the answer was the same.

"Everything will disappear."

It's not a bad phrase, she thought to herself. But both she and Keena would remain, for a millennium at least.

"When everything disappears, what is left?" she whispered. If nothing else, her data would be restorable even after a thousand years. Or would the whole universe disappear with Keena's death? No answer was forthcoming.

"For the gods, everything will disappear." she said, and looked out the window.

Yes. For the gods, everything would disappear. She was just a terminal on the network. She didn't have a self, like the gods did. The asteroid was close enough that she could see the energy coursing over its surface. From this position, it seemed like it was half the size of the Earth. It probably wasn't actually that big, but it was still obviously big enough to destroy the planet. It felt less like an asteroid, and more like a huge ball of energy. Like a sphere full of churning, molten hot liquid.

A call came in. It was from Hiroshi.

"Korone... are you listening?"

"Yes." Korone answered.

"I'm about to stop the asteroid..."

"The odds of that working are precisely zero," Korone said coldly.

"I know that... but you didn't have to say it."

"No... If you know it, shouldn't you not be trying?"

"I have to. I promised."

"I see. You promised. But that won't change the result, you know."

"I know... but I wanted someone to hear me, in the end."

“Very well. Let us converse.”

“I’m about to create a plasma ball and slam into it. Can you see me?”

“I can.” Korone zoomed in her vision. There was a small dot of light in the asteroid’s path. It was Hiroshi.

“Here I go! Here I go... You know, I don’t actually know what to say at a time like this. Am I just supposed to shout really loud? I can’t think of anything...”

“Hiroshi.”

“What?”

“If nothing else, in the end, you were a hero.”

“Thank you... ah... uwah...”

There was nothing left on the line but static. Hiroshi’s light was silently absorbed by the light from the asteroid.

“Goodbye,” Korone whispered softly.

The asteroid got closer and closer to Earth. The torrents of energy on its surface spiraled out like tornadoes and wrapped around the planet. From the Earth, it must’ve looked just like the scene of destruction that Boichiro Yamato saw. Perhaps in the torrents, the minds of alien beings could be seen. But even they soon lost their meaning. The asteroid itself soon crashed into the planet, shattering its crust.

Korone heard no sound at all. But as the crust rose up in a wave and fell, tens of thousands of people must have been screaming. The explosion from the impact swelled up, rippling like a living thing, and tearing away the planet’s atmosphere. The shock waves traveled through its core and erupted on the other side. In their wake followed tidal waves and pieces of the Earth’s crust. When the waves faded, all that remained were clouds of dust and boiling oceans.

“And thus the world met its end...”

Korone thought about reading a poem, but her network link was dead. The Earth’s gods were long gone.

“And so this and that happened, and then the Earth ended.” She decided to say it in her own words. “Silently, without sound, but with a big boom.”

When she saw that the Earth was nothing but a ball of boiling magma and water, she got into her futon.

“Goodnight, everyone,” she said to no one in particular, and the station’s power turned off.



6 - Limbo

Junko Hattori's memories were fragmented, but clear. She remembered being burnt by the colorless flames. She could remember the terrifying feeling, a mixture of heat and pain. She remembered being inside that hell, and how the psychological pain was far worse than the physical. But now, that feeling was just a memory. Her body was unharmed. She was dressed, and standing by a beach. The waves were lapping at her feet.

The ocean.

The beach.

She looked around. All she could tell was that she was on a beach somewhere, at a bay. She was standing on a short, crescent-shaped beach. On the right side was a cape, and behind it, a dark jungle. And to her left was a massive, sheer cliff. This was no ordinary cliff.

She looked up it. It seemed to go on forever and ever. It broke through the clouds and went up as far as the eye could see.

Impossible.

That was Junko's conclusion.

If this world was still Earth, what she was seeing was impossible. The cliff's height and length seemed to go on forever. At least, they went as far as she could see. And what was more, the cliff was collapsing into the ocean at a constant speed. At its bottom it was turning into blocks that looked like CG polygons, before disappearing into the ocean. But for all that, the cliff didn't seem to change at all.

Some kind of... infinite cliff?

She felt a sudden chill as she looked up at the cliff, which extended high into the heavens. And then she saw something even more frightening. The sky she was looking up at was dark. There was no sun, just a dark heavy layer of clouds. Normally, even on a cloudy day you could tell where the sun was. This world had no sun. But strangely, she could still see her surroundings. It was somewhere between night, and a cloudy day, in terms of visibility.

A VPS, perhaps? She wondered, as she looked around at the sea.

But there was no sign of the unnatural characteristics that VPSes always exhibited. In a VPS, the waves would be coming in at a set tempo, immediately obvious to even a casual observer.

Did I... die?

She began to wonder if this was the afterlife. The terror she felt began to grow stronger. B-But even if I did... why am I here alone? She decided to think logically, in order to drive away the fear. If this were the afterlife, she wouldn't be here alone. Many people died with her at the same time. I-I guess for now, I need to go somewhere...

She started to walk. She was able to walk across the beach. She could hear the sand crunching beneath her feet. She wasn't going anywhere near that cliff. Which meant that going into the jungle was her only choice.

The jungle was filled with thick vegetation, forming an impassable wall of green. Even if it was her only option, it was still worrying, not knowing what could happen there.

Akuto...

As she grew more and more worried, the name suddenly came to her. But there was no way she would see him here, she knew. And her sadness only grew. The tears came naturally. She wiped them off her cheeks and looked forward. If I can still think, it means I'm not dead... Which meant if she kept walking, eventually she'd get somewhere.

She started to walk toward the jungle. And then, she heard water splashing behind her. She turned around in shock. Someone was crawling out of the sea.

Junko screamed and tensed up. The man seemed to have just washed up on the shore.

I-I didn't see anything a moment ago...

There was no way she could've missed him. The man must've just washed up on shore a few moments ago. He slowly stood up, staggering and splashing. It was a tall man. Suddenly, he looked up. His hair was stuck to his face, but there was no way that Junko would fail to recognize him.

D-Don't tell me...

The doubt kept her from speaking for a moment. He saw her first, and shouted.

"Junko...!"

And then, when she heard his voice, she was sure.

“Akuto…!”

Junko ran over to him without thinking.

“I’m so happy… I knew I’d find you!” Akuto said, just as Junko leapt into him and gave him a hug.



“Akuto!”

The two of them fell into the water with a splash.

“Uwaahn! Akuto!”

Normally Junko was reluctant to show her feelings, but this time she couldn’t control herself. She broke down in tears. This must’ve seemed strange to Akuto, because he pulled her head back to look at her face suspiciously.

“Are you... really Junko?”

“What? How rude! What about you? Are you really Akuto...?”

Junko responded, and then she must’ve gotten scared, because she backed away from him toward the beach at incredible speed.

“Y-You really are Akuto, right?”

Akuto laughed when he saw this.

“Hahahahaha... Yeah, you really must be Junko.”

As Akuto doubled over laughing, Junko’s feelings of suspicion turned into feelings of shame.

“Y-You dummy! Normally you’d worry, right? If you were in a place like this, and somebody who had no business being here showed up.”

“That’s right. I can understand why you’d be worried. Ignoring the fact that your first action was to leap straight at me...”

Akuto was still laughing.

“D-Damn it! This is so humiliating... Y-You’d better be the real Akuto!”

Junko pointed at him. Akuto stopped laughing.

“Yeah, you and I are both probably real. This is the afterlife, after all.”

“What?”

Junko couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

○

Hiroshi had no way of knowing it, but at the same time Akuto was reunited with Junko, he was alone in the jungle.

It doesn’t feel like I’m dead... It feels more like I’m in a dangerous, unfamiliar world. Hiroshi thought to himself. This may be the afterlife, but there still seemed like there was a chance he might die.

“Why am I wearing my suit, anyway?”

He didn’t have a mirror, but he could see his visor in front of him, and when he looked at his hands he could see the Brave gloves. But the suit didn’t seem to be working. He couldn’t use his flight power or his attacks, and there was nothing lit up inside the visor. But he could still see what was around him, and it wasn’t slowing him down at all.

Normally if the battery cut out, the suit would be too heavy to easily move around in. It was hard to imagine he’d show up in the afterlife in the form he’d had when he died.

Maybe, he thought to himself, *you show up in the afterlife in the form you imagine yourself. And if that’s the case… maybe I can see the people I imagine myself meeting.*

But he didn’t see anybody in the dark fortress. For that matter, he couldn’t think of anybody he’d want to imagine meeting.

As he walked, he found a path through the forest. It was a narrow trail, probably only used by animals, but it lead to an area where the trees got thinner, that might have been a clearing.

Who do I want to meet that’s already dead? Hiroshi thought to himself.

A face came to him.

Actually…

By the time the thought came to him, the man he wanted to meet was already nearby.

“I didn’t expect to see you here…” A calm voice said.

There was a tree stump up ahead, and a man was sitting on it.

“Boichiro Yamato…” Hiroshi whispered.

He was the one who’d given Hiroshi the Brave Suit, the time traveler who’d created CIMO8. And, he realized, a man who knew more about what this world was than anyone else.

“So it’s you, huh?” Boichiro said. He was wearing a suit that Hiroshi recognized, and was far calmer than he should have been, considering the circumstances.

He didn’t know why the man felt so out of place here, but he knew that he didn’t like his smile.

“Actually, Yuko’s probably dead too,” Hiroshi said.

He’d forgotten that fact. If he hadn’t forgotten, perhaps he could have seen her first. He regretted remembering Boichiro instead.

“I apologize. But I’m sure you understand that I didn’t want to

run into a man here, either."

That was the kind of man Boichiro was, come to think of it: annoying and flamboyant, but smart enough to understand what Hiroshi was thinking from a single sentence.

But still, there seemed to be some kind of fate in their meeting here.

"You know... that this is the afterlife," Hiroshi said.

Boichiro already seemed to know everything.

"I've been here longer than you, after all. Though from my perspective, I only just arrived."

"You did?" Hiroshi frowned. A lot of time had passed since Boichiro's death.

"That's right. Just a little bit ago. Perhaps time is experienced differently here."

"That would... make sense, actually. But how did you know this was the afterlife, then?"

"CIMO8 had a deep understanding of this world's nature. I had The One working for me, after all. I know most things."

Come to think of it, Boichiro had to have recruited The One.

"Then you know about the Faceless Power, and the other stuff?"

"I knew from the start. But you refused to listen to a word I said." Bochiro grinned sardonically.

"There was no way we could believe it. Not back then."

Hiroshi felt a little guilty, so he mumbled a bit as he spoke.

"I'm not blaming you for it. I kept my actions secret because I knew people wouldn't understand."

"But The One was trying to destroy humanity..."

"I knew what he wanted. That's why I should've done the ritual first."

Boichiro had been trying to perform a ritual with the Law of Identity. Looking back, the ritual would have turned humanity into beings of pure mind and sent them to another universe. At the time, he hadn't understood that, but now he could see the logic.

"But that's not natural..."

"Neither is the fact that we're here in the afterlife, talking to each other. But in the end, the Faceless Power will absorb all. Humanity has already been destroyed."

"Then we're not safe just because the afterlife is real."

"Mankind has, in the end, only two choices. Either be destroyed and become a Faceless Power of its own, to be used by the

inhabitants of another universe. Or become beings of pure mind and transition to another universe."

"But there may be some other way..." Hiroshi said, but Boichiro just shook his head.

"How many times do you think I've looped through time?"

There was a heavy weight to his words. But for some reason, Hiroshi still disagreed

"But maybe the boss..."

"What?"

Boichiro's gaze became more intense. Hiroshi faltered for a moment, but kept talking.

"But maybe the boss... could do something you couldn't."

Boichiro shook his head.

"It only seems that way because the Law of Identity chose him."

"Chose him?"

"The Law of Identity is the author of the world. There's no escaping from what she writes. That's why I chose to do the ritual with her, and rewrite the world... and move us to another universe."

"Then there is no third path?" Hiroshi asked, uncertain.

Boichiro nodded.

"None. Think about what's happening here in the afterlife. Why did we meet here? Because it's convenient for the Law of Identity, right? Doesn't it feel like you're inside a story? Isn't it the case that the man you call "boss," Akuto Sai, is hated due to blind belief in stories? But he's the hero of the story involving the Law of Identity, isn't he? Can he escape from that? Even here in the world after death, we're being forced to play out our roles. How can we escape from a story that somebody else is writing?"

Hiroshi couldn't come up with a good answer.

"But if we can travel through time..." he said, stubbornly grasping for the first thought he had.

"Time in this world is curved. Like a mind, or no, like a story. I don't mean relativity, like in physics. That's why time travel is possible, because what's important isn't time, it's the story. No matter what you do, the story will go on," Boichiro said.

"But..." Hiroshi interrupted, but then he realized why he was so obsessed with finding a third path. It was because he wasn't happy with his role in the story, as the hero.

"I just need you to tell me how to travel through time. If I can

do that, then...”

He didn’t know how to finish his sentence, but he wanted something good to come out of this meeting.

“And then?” Boichiro asked, coldly.

“I... this time I will find a way to escape from this story.” Hiroshi said, his voice quiet, but firm.

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's been a long time. It's me, Shoutarou Mizuki.

I'm really sorry I kept you all waiting for so long.

Words can't express my gratitude for the people who looked forward to and bought this book.

After I finished writing volume 11, I got panic disorder and depression, and couldn't write anything for a whole year and a half.

Some people say that anybody deeply involved in a subculture is likely to get depressed as they get older, and that's just what happened to me. I feel like I've witnessed the birth of a new folk belief.

But joking aside, my symptoms were really bad. At the start, I couldn't even get in a train, bus, or car. And after that it was constant insomnia, headaches, and stiff shoulders.

I still have shoulder problems and sleeping disorders.

I haven't fully recovered, but I'm at the point where I can write.

I think that with your support, I'll be able to get better.

I know it's selfish, but please continue to support me.

Also, everything that came out after volume 11 was either not a novel, or something I wrote beforehand.

I definitely didn't abandon the book.

I know this feels like I'm just making excuses, but this is my explanation for the delay in the release.

We're almost at the climax of the book. There's one, maybe two volumes left to go.

I'm not fully recovered, so it may take a little more time, but I hope you'll stay with me.

Also, lately, let me thank those involved from the bottom of my heart.

I caused a lot of problems for you beyond what's normal.

Especially my editor, O, and Soichi Ito. I have no words.

Please don't abandon your poor author!

We're almost to the end! I hope you'll keep reading.



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by Shoutarou Mizuki

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